

Parshat b'Haalot'chah: Balancing Natural Forces

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This week's Torah portion begins on a positive, confident note. Moshe (Moses) is commanded to transmit the Divine instructions for lighting the oil-lamp *menorah* to Aharon (Aaron), and to dedicate the tribe of Levi to the service of the *mishkan* (Tabernacle). The instructions are clear, simple, and direct, and the imagery is positive—light, bathing, cleanliness, consecration.

Yet, by the end of the *parshah*, the Jewish nation has degenerated to the point that they are punished with mass destruction and burial at *Kivrot haTaavah*, the Graves of Appetite. What ideal is symbolized by lighting of the *menorah* at the beginning of the *parshah*, and how did we fail so disastrously to achieve it?

The *menorah* is mentioned repeatedly in the Torah, usually in conjunction with the *shulchan*, the table and shelves that held the *lechem panim*, or “showbread”.¹ What is the connection between these two items? The only relationship between the *shulchan* and the *menorah* that the Torah mentions is geometric: twice in the Torah we are directed that the *menorah* is to be placed on the southern side of the *mishkan*, and the *shulchan* on its northern side.²

At a time when our ancestors lived in intimate contact with nature, north and south carried many important connotations. The north wind brings cool, moist air and rain clouds; the south wind (*shar'av* or *chamsin*) is hot, dry, and dusty. Like all farmers, ancient Jews hoped that each would arrive at the time when it would be beneficial. The Talmud recognizes this fact:

“The north wind is helpful to wheat when it has completed one third of its ripening, and damaging to olive trees in bloom. The south wind is damaging to wheat that is one-third ripe, and a benefit to olive trees when they are in bloom. Hence, the *shulchan* was placed in the north, and the *menorah* in the south.”³

When do these winds occur? The late spring period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* is known in Hebrew as *sefirah* (literally ‘counting’). This name refers to the fact that the Torah gives no date for *Shavuot*. Rather, we are instructed to count 49 days, beginning with the second day of *Pesach*.⁴ The fiftieth day is then the date of *Shavuot*; hence its English name ‘Pentecost.’ In Israel, the weather of the first weeks of *sefirah* is still dominated by the northern air masses that arrive during the winter. This cool, moist

¹ Need sources for this

² Exodus 26:35 and Exodus 40:22-25

³ Babylonian Talmud (200 C.E.--500 C.E.) Baba Batra 147a

⁴ Leviticus 23:15-16

northern air bring the rains of winter and early spring.⁵ An ample supply of water is essential to the growth of any plant part, including seeds and fruits. Thus, the north wind helps the young growing wheat grains to expand. This growth enables the grains to fill with starch and protein later, as they mature. However, olive trees and other fruit trees flower during this period. Warm, dry conditions favor the pollination of olive flowers. Rain during the first weeks after *Pesach*, while beneficial to wheat, would wash away the olive pollen and discourage pollinating bees from visiting the flowers. Conversely, rain during the final weeks of *sefirah*, close to *Shavuot*, promotes the growth of olive fruit, but it also encourages the growth of fungi that can damage the wheat crop. Wet conditions also delay the wheat harvest, leading to rotting of the grain or attacks by grain-eating insects and birds.⁶

Placement of the *menorah* and the *shulchan* together in the *mishkan* symbolically reminds us that both natural forces-- the rainy north wind and the drying south wind—are under the control of the same One G-d, Who rewards us with a healthy balance between these forces. If we understand this and acknowledge our dependence on G-d, we can expect to be rewarded with the produce affected by natural forces under the control of Heaven. We are promised as much in the Torah.⁷ But if we imagine that we can separate natural forces from each other or from their Divine source, whether through polytheism, idolatry, or radical materialism that denies G-d, then we are doomed to failure.

This was the offense of those who died at *Kivrot haTaavah*. To crave meat was not a sin. To indulge gluttonously without acknowledging the Creator or the limits of Creation was an expression of contempt for all that G-d had done for them. Such behavior leads to disaster. Indeed, Rashi⁸ points out that the demand for meat and other food was a mere pretext to complain.⁹ To complain about what? Rashi's comment seems to reflect the Talmud's suggestion that the complaint was not about substance, but an expression of frustration at living under the *mitzvot*.¹⁰ The reflexive language—*hit'avu ta'ava*—"they cultivated a craving"—evokes a group that dwells on its own frustrated desires. A generalized dissatisfaction, expressed in endless demands for more material things that do not bring happiness, can never be satisfied. Rashi calls this a pretext for complaint. Today, we would call it insatiable consumerism. We are told that the Israelites collected enormous quantities of quail that they would never be able to consume, decimating the birds. A desire that can never be satisfied consumes resources to the point of destructiveness. An insatiable consumer can become a public danger who must be restrained until he or she can be reeducated to an attitude of gratitude and humility. Rashi

⁵ Orni, Efraim and Elisha Efrat. 1971. *Geography of Israel, Third Edition*. Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. Pp. 135ff.

⁶ HaReuveni, Nogah. 1980. *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage*. Neot Kedumim, Kiryat Ono, Israel. Pp. 30-42, 59-60.

⁷ Leviticus 26:3-13

⁸ 11th Century Jewish scholar and commentator, France.

⁹ Numbers 11:4

¹⁰ Yoma 75a

explains further¹¹ that the deaths at *Kivrot haTaavah* continued until the quail had been provided for a month, demonstrating that this miraculous provision was indeed possible, though it did not satisfy the complainers.

What is the alternative to seeking solace in destructive unbridled consumption? Commenting on the instructions for the lighting of the menorah at the beginning of our *parsha*, Rashi explains that its lamps did not face out to maximize the illumination.¹² Rather, they were turned inward toward the *menorah's* center, as if to indicate that we should cultivate an inward light, not an attitude of entitlement or superiority. This is the key to avoiding *Kivrot haTaavah*. Crass, self-seeking consumerism and over-consumption lead us and all around us to a bad end. The *menorah* and the *shulchan* remind us that Heaven provides all things, good and ill. Understanding that everything in our world proceeds from G-d, both when it serves our desires and when it does not, leads us to appreciate and express gratitude for what we have. Humble and prudent stewardship of our limited resources will ensure a future for ourselves and our descendants. As the famous *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* reminds us, “Who is prosperous? One who is content with his portion.”¹³

Action Items:

Keeping in mind the physical and spiritual dangers of insatiable consumerism, here are some practical tips to spend less:

- 1) Decide what you really care about, and avoid spending resources on things you don't really want or need. For example:
 - you may be tempted by a new cell phone or the latest computer when the one you have works just fine. See if you can keep yours for another six months or a year to save money and reduce the resources used on a new one.
 - If you seldom transport more than 5 people, you probably won't need an SUV. If you do need a large vehicle, consider a minivan, which has as much space as an SUV, is less expensive, uses less fuel, and produces less air pollution.
 - Are you planning a move? In addition to proximity to synagogues, school, work, and shopping, think about access to efficient public transportation.
- 2) Instead of seeking happiness through purchasing, make a list of pleasures you can take in daily life. Authentic pleasures are satisfying and enduring. Give these to yourself as presents.
- 3) Save money and produce less trash by planning your buying in advance and avoiding single-serving packages. For example:
 - Bring your lunch to work. Include a treat as a reward for yourself.

¹¹ Numbers 11:20

¹² Numbers 8:2

¹³ Mishna (around 200CE) Avot 4:1

- Remember to pack sandwiches and snacks for long car trips to avoid buying non-nutritious, over-priced snacks at highway convenience stores.

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Dr. Greenberg received his Bachelor's degree with honors in biology from Brown University and his Master's and Doctorate in agronomy from Cornell University. He has also studied with Rabbi Chaim Bravender at Israel's Yeshivat Hamivtar and conducted research at Cornell, the US Department of Agriculture, and the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Greenberg was a Senior Editor of science textbooks at Prentice Hall Publishing Co. and an assistant professor at the School of Education at Indiana University. He teaches science at Yeshivas Ohr Yosef and is a frequent speaker at synagogues and schools.