

Drash for June 14, 2008 – B'ha'alotecha  
Fred Isaac

This week's Parasha is B'ha'alotecha. Chapter 8 begins with God telling Moses to instruct Aaron about raising the "Neirot", the eternal lights in the Mishkan, in the tent of meeting. The portion then discusses the purification of the Israelites themselves, and the setting apart of the clan of Aaron, the Levites, for service.

Chapter 9 contains God's instruction about the Passover sacrifice. It then shifts to a reminder to Moses – and by extension the people – that some of them will not be able to present their offerings at the designated time. They should, however, do so at another time. This teaches that while ritual unclean-ness may be necessary (those who work with the dead, for example), it does not exempt us from our duties. Having heard these rules, the Israelites go out on the next leg of the journey, led by the cloud of smoke and pillar of fire above the tent.

Chapter 10 opens with more instructions from God to Moses. This time God describes the making of silver horns, which are identified as "war trumpets," which will signal the nation in times of crisis. The chapter concludes with the departure of Moses's father in law (here known as "Hobab"), whose earlier advice about the division of labor among the leaders (in Exodus) was so invaluable to Moses.

In Chapter 11 we hear the next in the long series of complaints by the people. "We remember how good life was in Egypt," they wail, "and how much we had to eat." God, understandably, becomes angry, and threatens to "kill them with kindness" for their lack of faith and for their gluttony. Moses, however, intercedes, and asks God if the promised wrath is too great. In response, God sends a plague, which kills those who ignored the community and craved the ways of slavery over the trials of freedom.

The final chapter this week starts with an accusation against Moses, because his wife is a Cushite, an outsider. Moses, Miriam and Aaron are called to the Tent, and when they emerge Miriam is stricken with a skin rash. Though Moses pleads for her to be cured, God condemns her, and she is banished for 7 days, until the affliction heals.

The title of our Parasha is used in regard to the lamps that will be set up in the Mishkan. Plaut translates the word as "mounting" or "setting up." But the root of the word is "Oleh", to go up. The Olah offering was one of the responsibilities of the priests when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. And when we pray, the mystics tell us that we are indeed lifted up, closer to God.

This past week we celebrated Shavuot, the day we received Torah at Sinai. Once again we heard the words of God's first instruction to the people of Israel. It caused me to

wonder about Prayer; what it is, what it means, and how we use it. We have been using Mishkan T'Filah for several months. We've used it twice a month on Friday evenings as the siddur for Erev Shabbat. We've adopted it here in the Shabbat Minyan service. And we use it every week at the Tuesday morning Minyan. We have slowly integrated it into our lives. One of the stated purposes of this siddur is that it was created in order to enable a congregation to engage in "multiple conversations." It's time to start thinking and talking about the siddur. How do we use it? How do we interact with it? And what does it mean to us now that we are using it regularly.

In our service today we have prayed in a variety of ways:

"Eilu d'varim sh'ein lahem shi'ur." - "These are the obligations for which there is no limit." We read these lines at the beginning of the service. We read them alternately, left and right sides of the congregation.

The Nisim b'chol yom, the daily blessings recited on waking up, are our opportunity to thank the Holy One for giving us life and its wonders. We read them alternately, men and women each taking a turn.

We recite certain blessings in a call and response mode. The Kedusha after the Avot and Gevurot is traditionally done in this manner. The Leader - Fran in our case - chants the first line, and then the congregation responds with the appropriate following line. This continues from the top of the page to the bottom.

While we read most of the service as a group, we did a portion of the T'filah silently. Thus, each of us had the opportunity to pray as an individual, as well as in a group. Some prayers we recite in English, while others we say in Hebrew. The question of language and the issues of translations are subjects for another time. But it's certainly true that some of prayers are more familiar than others - there are new phrases in some of them that we haven't quite gotten accustomed to. And some of them we learnt in Hebrew without quite knowing what the words mean exactly

Today, we have chanted a significant portion of our service. We spoke a few of the prayers, but most of them have tunes. We've become attached to lots of these melodies, from Torah trope to the grand music of the 19th century composer Lewis Lewandowski and Debbie Friedman's Mi Shebeirach. Our rabbis and the Cantor have encouraged us to learn the melodies, and to join them.

All of these are different ways to carry out the conversation with God. Each of them uses the words of the prayers - what the rabbis call "Keva." In addition, each mode, from Ma Tovv when we started, through praying the pages of the Amidah silently to closing with a joyful sound of the closing song, is also an opportunity for us to add our

own piece to the mix. It is our chance to become joyful, to become more than observers, and to take an active role in the process of prayer. The rabbis called this part "Kavannah" - the desire, the emotion of the prayers.

Much of what we have done today is vastly different from the ways the Classical Reform Jews prayed 50 years ago. Their services were mostly in English, and primarily consisted of recitations by the Rabbis and ...

The question I have for you all today is "How do you like to pray?" What sorts of things do you like to do? How do you make the services your own, in the midst of a congregation? And how do you make every service different for yourself? What makes each Shabbat different for you? Today, did you, for example, meditate on a different prayer (or read a different passage in Mishkan) at some point?

As the rabbis tell us, "now the task is ours." We are asked to take the written words and make them our own. As we move from moment to moment through our weeks, and from Shabbat to Shabbat, how do we focus on our unique opportunities to praise the Holy One? And how do we make those choices most important to ourselves.

Several times in the Torah, we are told that each person was asked to bring individual gifts to God. B'ha'alotecha is one of these opportunities when the Community erected its Tabernacle and "raised up" its lights. How can each of us do the same thing?

Shabbat Shalom.