

Parashat Beha'alotcha: NUMBERS 8:1-12:16 June 13, 2009 Temple Sinai Minyan

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When Lora Thielbar asked me to give this drash, I realized that you can't say "No" to Lora, the reason being that she is so full of love for the spiritual and intellectual aspects of Judaism, you're humbled in the face of all that, and find yourself wanting to be a part of it, too. But what I did say was, "I have only a few weeks to come up with something?"

I had my b'at mitzvah three years ago, a wonderful experience along with thirteen other women at Temple Emanuel in Los Angeles. I'd spent an entire year pondering what to say about my little portion of just a few lines, which consisted entirely of the names of the kvetching, worried scouts or spies sent into Canaan in the upcoming parashat Shelach L'Chah. What could you say about a bunch of names? I pondered so hard over the course of that year, I actually made what I thought was a brilliant scholarly discovery--there was a missing dot in one of the vowels, in every version I looked at! I was tremendously excited about the mystery of that missing dot, until I was told that the rabbis have been discussing the missing dot for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years.

In any case, there is lots to say about this parashat, including another mystery, and, as with other Torah portions I've studied, I was struck by the humor, intellectual excitement, and an underlying sense of universal meaning--all the elements of any great read. I'd also asked Lora, before I'd read it, "Is there anything about moving in it?" as moving here from L.A. has been the big theme of Gerry's and my life this year. She said, "Joanne, you know you can find anything in it that you're looking for..."

And "Duh". Of course the whole parashat is about moving, a journey from one part of the desert to another. (Not to mention moving as the great theme of our people, from slavery to freedom, which we recreate at our tables every spring.) But there's lots more in it, and the difficulty for me this time was deciding what not to talk about, because it all seemed so relevant

So we have God telling Moses precisely how to instruct Aaron on the lighting of the seven-branched Menorah: "beha'alotcha" of "lift up" the flames, towards its face. He tells Moses exactly how to purify the Levites, who are selected from the community to help the priests with sacrifices. He was told when exactly to make Pesach, and what an Israelite could do if he missed the spiritual fulfillment of the Pesach sacrifice, and the welcoming of converts and resident aliens to this ritual.

Next, we have a detailed description of God in the shape of a cloud hovering over the Tabernacle by day, and in the shape of fire by night. When the cloud lifted, the Israelites knew to break camp, and follow. The text is quite insistent that it is God, and God alone, who decided the pace and direction of the journey. I smiled at the image of a busy, bossy, bustling little cartoon-cloud leading the way.

Moses is told to create silver trumpets to be blown by Aaron's sons, the priests, on important occasions, and tadah! Off they go through the desert, each tribe carrying its own banner.

And then there follows in this parashat what I like to call The Mystery of the Two Upside-Down Letter Nuns, equivalent in intellectual excitement to the missing vowel dots I mentioned earlier. These two upside-down nun's bracket the portion that my husband Gerry just read (Chapter 10 verses 35-36) which are the words Moses said to

God before and after the Ark's journey: "Advance, Oh, Lord! May your enemies be scattered, And may Your foes flee before You!" And upon arrival: "Return, Oh Lord, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!"

The sages throughout the ages have weighed in about the meaning of those upside-down nuns, leading Rabbi Lawrence Kushner to conclude in his book, *The Book of Letters*, that really, nobody knows what they mean.

The sages also can't come to a consensus about the incessant kvetching of the Israelites during their journey. Are they bored, scared, or just pampered? They kvetch about the manna they're given to eat (which sounds very yummy in the text, made into lovely cakes tasting like rich cream) but what they remember is the free fish and other foods they used to get in Egypt. Which is just like Gerry and I, amidst all these great restaurants of the East Bay, and all the fabulous farmer's markets, harping about the lack of great delis like we had in L.A.

The sages also quibble about the meaning of Miriam's and Aaron's criticism of Moses' choice of a wife ("He married a Cushite!") but what really interested me was why only Miriam got leprosy and was banished for slandering Moses, shades of Sotomayor being called too domineering because she's a woman.

So, you see there's LOTS for me to talk about in the parashat, but what it all came down to, thematically, for me, was my first question. "Is it about moving?" Yes, it is. That's what resonated for me in the end.

I have been planning moves all my life-- what I was going to do at this or that age, in this city, in that job, in this story that I would write, in that meal I'd prepare, always projecting myself in the future. And this particular move to the East Bay, to be

with our children and grandchildren, was planned and prepared for as meticulously and hopefully as the Children of Israel's preparations for the Promised Land. But what I have learned is that when you move, wherever you go--surprise! There you are. That is, you bring the same baggage with you, everywhere. So I still found myself projecting myself forward, worrying about what the future would bring in this new place, like the scouts worrying about the new land. Did I make the right move? What if the kids move to Portland? Will we have to follow them there, too? And, at the same time, I found my mind projecting backwards, as the Israelites did, recalling whole lives lived elsewhere, nostalgic for things we'd left behind. So there I was, as usual, worrying about the future, thinking about the past, back and forth, back and forth, and when you're constantly moving between the past and the future, frankly, you're really nowhere.

So then we joined Temple Sinai. And, lo and behold, at services, I had the strangest experience--a strikingly strong perception that I was standing before the very same Torah, the exact same Ner Tamid, the same lifted-up flames, with the same community I had stood with before. The little white cloud had stopped to rest. Thinking about that experience, for me, The Mystery of the Two Upside-Down Letter Nuns, is solved.

The Talmud calls the verses bracketed by those Nuns a separate "book" of the Bible, with its own message. In my mind, those nuns look like tiny lifted-up torches, lighting up the words themselves. Moses is talking only to God in that passage, about God's journey, not the people's. Because it is the words of Torah that travel with us, wherever we go, reminding us that every single moment is meaningful, and to cherish that moment while we can. Whether sitting in the stillness of prayer, seeing a

grandchild's gap-toothed smile, planting a wood fern, hearing an adagio, sharing a pot of soup and a joke with a loved one, moving, moving through this vast desert of time we call our lives--those words transmit their light, creating holiness, in present time.

And we are home.