



PARSHAS BEHA'ALOSCHA 5777

The first part of Beha'alosechah concludes the period of Mattan Torah and Ma'amad Har Sinai. Hashem gave Moshe the second luchos on Yom Kippur along with forgiveness for the sin of the egel. Immediately afterwards was the commencement of the construction of the Mishkon. Hashem wanted the hashro'as hashechinah experienced at Har Sinai to become a permanent presence among Klal Yisroel. The goal was that a Jew would feel connected to Hashem every day and in every aspect of life. It isn't always easy. Because it isn't always easy, Hashem gives us things that help us connect to Him in many ways. That was the purpose of the Mishkon. But, in order to deserve that high level of hashro'as hashechinah, one has to be on a certain level.

After the Mishkon and its functioning are finished, Hashem designated Shevet Levi to serve in the Mishkon instead of the first born. Why Shevet Levi? To be continually in the presence of Hashem, one needs to maintain a high level in one's life. The history of Shevet Levi shows us why they were uniquely suited for this task. Their history touches on the theme we discussed two weeks ago.

When Klal Yisroel came to Egypt, Yehudah was sent ahead to set up a Yeshivah, so that the moment they would arrive in Egypt, the brothers and their families would have a place set aside to learn. The Rambam says that the Rosh Yeshivah in Egypt was Levi.

When his brothers and their families arrived in Egypt, Yosef and Yaakov wanted them to be separate from Egyptian society. He settled them in a separate area in the Land of Goshen. After Yosef and his brothers died, the Jews started a push to migrate out of the confines of the ghetto of Goshen which was set up to keep Klal Yisroel separate from the Egyptians. They wanted to integrate into Egyptian society and they stopped performing bris miloh. In response, the Egyptians became suspicious of possible plans for a take-over and started pushing back. Pharaoh contemplated what to do to neutralize the perceived threat and came up with a plan. He couldn't one day put the entire nation into slavery. It had to be done gradually. So he announced a nationwide campaign of national service—Egyptians including—headed by Pharaoh himself.

All the Jews who wanted to be a part of Egyptian society joined, and Shevet Levi did not. In addition, when Klal Yisroel stopped performing bris miloh, Shevet Levi continued. When there was a desire to integrate, Shevet Levi always said we don't want to integrate. We want to stay separate.

So when the time came to enlist in the national service, Shevet Levi never volunteered, and when the time came for the Egyptians to spring their trap, they were never enticed into the bonds of slavery. Throughout the 82 years that the

Jews were completely subjugated by Egypt, Shevet Levi was busy with their Torah and their Mesorah from the Ovos.

The sin of the egel was an outgrowth of the previous integration the Jews achieved while enslaved in Egypt. They had sunk to the 49th level of tumoh, and they were deeply involved in avodo zoro and the entire culture of Egypt.

We said in the Haggada, Hashem saw that Klal Yisroel was spiritually mature enough to break free from the tumoh of Egypt. They needed two mitzvos that would crystallize their readiness to reject the tumoh of Egypt and reach for higher levels of kedusho and taharah. So He gave them bris miloh, which was performed on adults—not 8 day old infants with no choice in the matter. There were no anesthetics and it was dangerous—so it showed an impressive commitment to endure danger, pain and suffering to achieve this higher level. They also had to slaughter a korban Pesach and paint the blood on their doorposts—which was also an impressive display of courage and fearlessness. It was to renounce the Egyptian gods and their previous lifestyle openly and publicly.

They achieved all this growth and development in a very short amount of time, and then, the moment they ran into a difficult situation, they panicked and crashed and regressed. But one shevet didn't regress—Shevet Levi. Why? Because they never sank into the tumoh of Egypt in the first place. When Moshe called out “Mi Lashem Elai”, all of Shevet Levi answered the call.

It is very interesting to note the contrast between the brocho that Levi received from Yaakov Ovinu and the one received by Shevet Levi from Moshe Rabbeinu. Shimon and Levi were the brothers who destroyed Shechem, incited Yaakov's extreme displeasure, and plotted against Yosef. Yaakov cursed their uncontrollable passion and violent anger. Moshe's brocho recounted how Shevet Levi stood up to every nisayon and supported Moshe Rabbeinu in every trial. They were rewarded with the position of teaching Torah to Klal Yisroel and doing the avodo in the Beis Hamikdosh. But, Shevet Shimon is never mentioned.

Yaakov Ovinu was nervous. He saw these were people of great anger and strong emotions. He decided to disperse them among Klal Yisroel. But there is a difference in how Shimon and Levi responded to their natural tendencies and strong propensities. Levi took his passions and emotions and channeled them in a certain direction—to serve Hashem.

Every one of us is given a certain set of personality traits. They can be used in many different directions. They aren't intrinsically good or intrinsically evil. It all depends on what you do with them. Each personality is unique. The Ramban says the Torah was given to roughly 600,000 Jews which is the

number of basic neshomos/personalities that exist. The Torah can fit every neshomo and every personality type. Even though each one of us is unique, we are unique in our specific combination of root personality traits. The Torah was accepted by every conceivable neshomo there could be. We can take that unique personality and do something constructive with it, and we can do something destructive with it.

Shevet Levi had all those strong emotions and passions—almost uncontrollable. Levi took himself aside and realized that until now he was using his personality in a destructive manner—he destroyed Shechem, and almost killed Yosef. So he made a decision to start channeling it to use it for Torah learning. 22 years after the sale of Yosef, Levi became the Rosh Yeshivah for the Shevatim. His descendants were so inspired by the example that their ancestor Levi set for them that they looked at themselves differently. We have to keep our mesorah. We cannot betray our heritage to integrate into Egyptian society.

Because of that they kept bris miloh in Egypt. They didn't join the national service and didn't become slaves. Because they remained free, they weren't sucked down into the 49 levels of tumoh along with the rest of Klal Yisroel and Egyptian society. So after ma'amad Har Sinai, they kept their cool and stayed true to the truth. They didn't have that pull to regress back to worshipping objects and needing a physical representation.

Because of that, they deserved to be in the inner circle of hashro'as hashechinoh around the Mishkon and do the avodo. They kept that mesorah and they saw with their Torah insight that Klal Yisroel is different and separate. We shouldn't be impressed with any foreign culture and ideology around us, as advanced and as sophisticated as it may be.

They stayed true to their mesorah and never had to feel they were second-class citizens. This is why Shevet Levi is set aside and made distinct in Parshas Bahalosecho.

Next in the parsha we find Moshe Rabbeinu asking Yisro to join the Jewish People on their journey to Eretz Yisroel. Yisro is a very complex individual. He is a person of very strong principles and morals. He dedicated his life to seeking the truth. He was an advisor to Pharaoh, and when the suggestion was made to kill all the Jewish boys, the midrash says there were three people who reacted differently. Yisro could not keep silent and was banished. He went from place to place and tried to find the truth in trying every avodo zoro. Ultimately he arrived at the truth of Hashem and it came at a tremendous personal price. He and his family were ostracized by the society around him. He was rewarded by getting Moshe as a son-in-law.

So Moshe turns to Yisro to take the next step in his path to Hashem. But Yisro refuses. He needs to return to his homeland. Joining Klal Yisroel is not easy. It means throwing your destiny together with a people whose fortunes are very unpredictable. They can be at the top and very suddenly at the very bottom. Klal Yisroel will go through suffering and golus before the geuloh. It is not simple and we warn geirim who want to convert that there is a steep price to getting the potential spiritual level of Klal Yisroel.

After this, we have the twin upside down nuns. Chazal tell us that this parsha is split into sections which divide the Chumash generally. The pesukim in between the nuns talk about the Aron Hashem moving and destroying the enemies of Hashem who are also by definition the enemies of Klal Yisroel. When we are on the proper level, we represent Hashem in this world and Hashem will protect us as a natural consequence of our being His ambassadors.

The first part of the parsha is devoted to specialness of Shevet Levi which is a lesson we all have to learn. The message is not just the history of a particular shevet. It is a lesson for all Jewish history about human behavior. The group understood the superiority of Klal Yisroel and because of that, developed the attitude of not being enraptured and enthralled with the surrounding culture. It is no accident that the group who could resist the lures and temptations of a sophisticated and advanced culture was the same group who was immersed in learning Torah. Those people understood that we don't have to be impressed with any foreign culture. Whatever we have from the Torah is way beyond anything that human beings can come up with. We are on a whole different level and because of that, we have to stay separate. We want to maintain that specialness and uniqueness.

This was why Shevet Levi didn't stop bris miloh, didn't join the national service. They didn't feel the need to integrate into Egyptian society and show them that we are just as good a citizen as they are. The sense that Klal Yisroel are on a different level—which they understood from their connection to Torah—is what prevented them from descending to the 49 levels of tumoh and deserved to live inside the inner circle of the shechinoh and spread Torah to Klal Yisroel. In order to spread Torah effectively, you have to first be convinced yourself that the Torah is a superior way of life and connection to Hashem, and that no foreign culture outside of Torah has anything of value to offer us.

This is the legacy of Shevet Levi and it should inspire us today. The Rambam says, anyone can join the legacy of Shevet Levi and decide to devote their life to Torah. But you need to have the understanding and inspiration of living on a superior level, separating from and not feeling inferior to, the other the cultures of the world.