

Beth Snyder
D'var Torah for Friday, June 12, 2009
Parasha B'haalot'cha
Numbers: 8:1-12:16

The Gift of Speech: Bringing the Sacred into the World

The parasha for this week, **B'haalot'cha**, meaning, “when you bring up” comprises chapters eight through twelve of Numbers. *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, edited by Dr. Tamara Eskanazi, summarizes these chapters very nicely. The Israelites begin their journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land. We learn about the rituals in the Tabernacle, such as the lighting of the menorah's lamps and the special laws concerning the appointing and consecrating of the Levites who serve in it, and also the second Passover offering. It tells of the instructions for traveling for the Israelites — the signals for moving forward and then making camp. God's presence takes the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, both of which travel before the camp. God asks Moses to have silver trumpets made as a means to summon the community and make announcements. Gracious as always (except when he gets mad), Moses invites his father-in-law to accompany them to Israel, and they all begin the journey with the Ark. Chapters 11-12 show the discontent of some of the Israelites, their challenges to Moses's leadership and their ingratitude, and the divine punishments that result. Moses asks for help from God, who offers to divide the burden of leadership between Moses and 70 elders that he can choose. Moses's authority is called into question by two of the elders and then by Aaron and Miriam. Miriam ends up with a major skin disease and a seven-day quarantine after she voices a negative comment about Moses' wife, Zipporah, and remarks on his authority as a prophet. (Moses prays for her healing, in a phrase that is familiar to us: *El na r'fa na la.*)

Chapters 11 and 12, in particular, present us with ways to think about how people communicate in the context of a community and then the larger issue of understanding different verbal styles and appropriate ways to respond to them. (The meaning of **B'haalot'cha**, “when you bring up” could have another connotation: be careful of when and how you speak.) These two chapters provide examples of how to talk about problems clearly, effectively, and with compassion, but, at least, *respectfully*. They also show you ways to communicate that don't work well, certainly not with God.

Three circumstances raise relevant questions about sharing feelings in a community. How *do* you best convey frustration in trying situations so that you can be constructive and feel heard? How do you talk about primal, essential needs? What do you do with jealousy and feelings about other people's relationships? Your community may be Or Chadash and/or another congregation. It could also be your family, your department at work; maybe your clients and colleagues. Maybe it's simply your partner or someone you just love deeply — or your cats or your fish tank.

For Moses, the community was 600,000 people in the Sinai wilderness/desert. He sets the best example here of communicating effectively and fairly. It seems as though he usually

does throughout the Torah, which is one excellent reason why God trusts, listens, and relies on him. In Chapter 11, verses one and two of *A Women's Commentary*, we read: "The people took to complaining bitterly before Adonai. Adonai heard and was incensed: a fire of Adonai broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to Adonai, and the fire died down." In the ArtScroll Series/Stone edition of the Torah, it's even more extreme; it reads: "The people took to seeking complaints." (p. 355). The way they expressed their frustration, (i. e. complaining, even worse, actively seeking it) was disrespectful to Moses, his leadership, and God's blessings (and authority). How does Moses respond here? He prays to God, and the fire dies down. The complaining represented ingratitude; it infuriated God. This serves as a wonderful example of a way to communicate that is not well received or well expressed. I should know, having complained numerous times at my job without a shred of gratitude. I might have tried expressing something positive somewhere in my speech to make a point.

Rabbi Jocee Hudson at Temple Beth Sholom in Santa Ana, California, wrote eloquently about the next instance of complaining, also in Chapter 11:

"... the Israelites, still wandering in the desert, become weary of travel and grow bored with their homogeneous diet of the desert food, manna. And they start to complain ... I call this part of Numbers the counter-narrative and delight in its inclusion ... we are given access to the on-the-ground reality of wandering. Torah does not romanticize life... Rather, it teaches us that life is often messy and includes disappointments, great and small."

So here we read in these verses that the "rabble" cultivated a craving and cried, "Who will feed us meat?" and, worse, reminisced about the fish they ate in Egypt "free of charge," along with "cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic." (p. 355 Artscroll) They forgot about the slavery aspect of their previous lives. Honestly, the manna described in verses 4-10 doesn't sound so bad: it drops from heaven, you pound it and cook it in a pot. It was like eating cornbread without the chili. But there were those who cried about this, Moses heard them, and so did God, whose wrath "flared greatly." (p. 355 Artscroll) So what does Moses do? He expresses despair, but he did so, it seems articulately; he made a case for himself, saying how am I going to feed these people, etc. He voiced his despair in an honest, very vulnerable way, and God said, choose 70 elders to help you, etc.

The last example of communication that I want to mention happens in Chapter 12 and involves *l'shon hara* and speaking about a topic that is a particularly sensitive to most of us. From the Artscroll Torah:

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married..." What has become known as "the Cushite reference" identifies Zipporah with the ancient inhabitants of North Sudan, i.e. the ancient Cushites (also known as Nubians — a black skinned, African people. To further explain, the Artscroll edition footnotes mention that Moses had to refrain from marital relations with his wife, Zipporah, in order

to be ritually pure at all times since God could speak to him at any moment. Miriam had reported this to Aaron, who was also critical.

This act of criticizing other people's choice in partners caught my attention. Is it really fitting to make judgments not only about other peoples' choice of partners but also infer something about the nature of their sexual relationships and if they even have one? No. But we do it. Some of this criticism has happened in my family and caused tremendous animosity. Relatives have commented on my dates most of my adult life. How did I respond? Not wisely, like Moses. I just ignored it and then became angry and reacted by shutting down and leaving emotionally. Instead, I could have said something really calm and evolved. I could also have forgiven, as Moses forgave Miriam in Chapter 12 and then prayed for her healing.

Regarding these comments and another reminder of the power of words in verbal communication, especially in the context of basic needs such as food, sex, personal power, and companionship, Rabbi Harold Kushner offers some insight in his book *To Life* (p. 69): "We sanctify our power of speech. Food, sex, and a sense of territoriality are all things we share with other animal species. But we are challenged to sanctify the ordinary in one other area that is unique to us human beings, the gift of speech. While some would claim that "talk is cheap," in Judaism words are real. The Hebrew language uses the same term, *davar*, to mean both 'word' and 'thing.'"

God did punish Miriam for instigating and speaking derogatory words about Moses' wife. The question of why it happened to Miriam and not Aaron is another matter. It occurred to me that her comments about Zipporah also reflect our own culture's tendency to encourage women to compete with and often denigrate other women, no matter straight or gay. In my view, we are all of us, men and women, taught to compete — for love, attention, money, and everything else.

In her d'var of a few weeks ago, Carol talked about our responsibilities in the community of Or Chadash. She wrote: "We need to renew each other and renew and cherish our resources." From her perspective as a Board member, she cited the Board's need to be respectful of all the members. I am thankful for these comments and want to add that *all of us* at OC need to be respectful of each other and consider how we communicate. Are we clear and respectful? Are we appropriate — what is the tone of our communication? Does it leave room for someone else's opinion?

We all have different communication styles here. Some of us prefer not to communicate at all, especially in uncomfortable circumstances. Maybe we don't know how to voice an opinion with others who are more vocal or who appear more confident. But we can also remember that each of us in this congregation has a talent or a perspective to offer. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.