

when they could encamp, where and when to break the camp. And as is described here, the will and the intention of this direction was absolutely unpredictable. Sometimes a long rest, sometimes just a few days. Sometimes only a night or a day and a night, or two days, a day, a year and as Nahmanides remarks, as there was nothing to indicate the duration of the stay, the people must often have received the sign to stop, have made all the arrangements for the encampment and then perhaps just after a few hours to pack up again, break camp and follow the cloud onwards again. Such was the school of wandering through the wilderness, which was to teach us for all time to follow God devoutly and trustfully, to have complete confidence in God, however little God's Guidance may seem comprehensible to us. We are to always do what God directs, always to feel cheerful under the crook of God's Guidance, always to be ready to defer the plan of our life to God . . . That said, it is not so much the strain of the lengthy wanderings as the patient endurance of the lengthy stops which seems to be stressed as the real tasks of the tests . . . This is more understandable when one thinks of the inhospitality of the desert, and remembers that the people knew quite well that the wilderness was not the end of their wanderings, but that their goal lay beyond in journeying to the Promised Land. (*Commentary on Numbers*, 149–50)

Hirsch's explanation compels us to reflect on God's role in our own lives, as well as the place of the divine within the nation. While Hirsch loyally describes the reality of the biblical wanderings of the Israelites (for which they are to be praised), the lesson he teases out of this episode should spark a good dose of spiritual wrestling. While there are times in our lives in which we may feel God intimately guiding our respective journeys, there are other moments in which we as individual Jews must take the initiative and not merely rely on the "cloud" or divine "crook" to guide us. The midrashic portrait of Nahshon jumping into the threatening waters of the Reed Sea when the rest of his brethren hesitated and the bold move of David Ben-Gurion to declare the establishment of the State of Israel are but two examples of moments when we could not wait for divine intervention. As Ecclesiastes teaches, "for everything there is a time" (Eccles. 3:1)—a time for submission to God's plan as well as a time for initiative and respectful resistance. The challenge for each of us is striking the sacred balance between these two approaches in our lives, a vital goal as we enter Shavu'ot this week.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.

Torah from JTS

Parashat Beha-alotekha 5774 / 2014

PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Lilly Kaufman, Director of the Torah Fund Campaign of Women's League for Conservative Judaism

The Working Life

In my family, we are not the retiring type—although we do tend toward shyness. What I mean is that we don't have a family tradition of retiring from professional work. We tend to work until we can't. When I noticed that Parashat Beha-alotekha features an early appearance of the idea of semireirement, I wondered about current work and retirement trends in the United States. Here is what I learned:

[T]raditional one-time, permanent exits from the labor force continue to be the exception rather than the rule, and . . . the retirement patterns of the Early Boomers, those on the cusp of retirement during the recent Great Recession, appear to be diverging from those of earlier cohorts. The Early Boomer women, in particular, were more likely than those in previous cohorts . . . to move to a bridge job prior to exiting the labor force completely, and both Early Boomer men and women were more likely to leave their career jobs involuntarily, with layoffs being a key factor.¹

Perhaps the earliest recorded "bridge job" is that of the 50-year-old Levite in Parashat Beha-alotekha. From the age of 25 through 50, a Levite is in the active phase of his (at the time, this would only apply to men) career. He participates in *avodat ohel mo'ed*, the service of the Tent of Meeting (Num. 8:25). At 50 years of age, he must *sheret et ehav*, or attend to his brothers (Num. 8:26). He may no longer lift and carry the heavy sacred objects of the Tabernacle, a physically demanding and spiritually dangerous job. Instead, he stands guard over the Sanctuary. *Avodah* is only for Levites in their prime; *sherut* is for Levites who are semiretired.

The Levite who never retires, Moses, performs a kind of work for which the rules about retirement are especially unclear: political leadership. He is an unusually gifted leader, which he demonstrates in Beha-alotekha (Num. 11:26–30). When the Israelites Eldad and Medad begin prophesying to the people of

Israel, Joshua, Moses's protégé and eventual successor, eagerly seeks to have them detained for defying Moses's authority. But Moses declines to have them stopped or censored in any way, saying, "Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put his spirit upon them!" (Num. 11:29).

Joshua, the *na'ar* (youth; Num. 11:27), the rising young leader from the tribe of Ephraim, feels any slight to his master more acutely than Moses does. But Moses is that rare thing, a leader secure enough in his own ego to share power.

Joshua has missed something fundamental about Moses. Moses's leadership arises from his compassion, his outrage about oppression, and, most of all, from his deep identification with his people. These qualities were first provoked to action by the sight of an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave (Exod. 2:11–15). In the brief Eldad-Medad episode, Joshua's loyalty to Moses, and his lack of Moses's exceptionally generous wisdom, are expressed simultaneously.

Moses's magnanimity toward Eldad and Medad is a generosity not required by his role as a Levite. It comes from his spiritual greatness, forged over years of leading his people and attending to God. God's high regard for Moses is stated in a forceful speech at the end of this week's parashah, when God rebukes Moses's older siblings, Miriam and Aaron, for gossiping against their younger brother. In this instance, God calls Moses '*avdi Mosheh* (My servant Moses) twice, using the term for the active Levite:

Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make myself known to him in a vision, I speak to him in a dream. *Lo khen 'avdi Mosheh*, Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not become terrified from speaking against '*avdi Mosheh*, My servant Moses?! (Num. 12:6–8)

Why is God so outraged on Moses's behalf? Miriam and Aaron are older Levite siblings, and seasoned leaders in their own right. By speaking ill of Moses, they have failed to be *mesharet et ehav*, to be attendants to their tribal brother, who is, in fact, their actual brother. It is so much easier to serve a brother who is a social construct than a familial relative.

Unlike Miriam and Aaron, for most of his life, Joshua succeeds at being *mesharet Mosheh*, as noted in our parashah, and in the opening words of the book of Joshua: "And it came to pass, after the death of Moses, 'eved

Adonai, servant of God, that Adonai said to Joshua, son of Nun, *mesharet Mosheh* [Moses's attendant] . . ." (Josh. 1:1).

Joshua is still *mesharet Mosheh* after Moses has died, and Moses is still '*eved Adonai*. Joshua only acquires the name '*eved Adonai* upon his death (Josh. 24:29). Joshua begins life as a *mesharet* and ends it as an '*eved*, the reverse of the Levitical path. He progresses from peripheral engagement in sacred work to more intimate connection to God.

Moses is always '*eved Adonai*, always held near by God. He does not show change in this regard in the manner of most Levites. During his lifetime, Moses knew no retirement age, and possessed a spiritual gift that cannot be captured in a job description, not even that of a Levite. Moses was very unusual. What most people learn from him, in regard to work?

We can think about the name we earn in the workplace, and about the quality and purpose of our work itself, whether we do it full-time, part-time, or in semireirement. We can see our work as making a contribution to the world, and consider how we are of service. And we can look for occasions to practice generosity of spirit in our work, which is to say, in our lives.

¹Cahill, Kevin E., Michael D. Giandrea, and Joseph F. Quinn, "Retirement Patterns and the Macroeconomy, 1992–2010: The Prevalence and Determinants of Bridge Jobs, Phased Retirement, and Reentry Among Three Recent Cohorts of Older Americans," *The Gerontologist* (Oxford University Press on behalf of the Gerontological Society of America), 2013.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

Balancing God's Will and Our Own

Parashat Beha-alotekha gives us insight into the Israelite trek through the wilderness. Far from undertaking a journey guided by their own instincts and initiative, the Israelites were bound to rely on divine guidance. Numbers 9:17 teaches, "And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp." What can be learned from the Israelite mode of transportation?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

The cloud was the Shepherd's crook by means of which God, the Shepherd of Israel, announced the Divine Will to the People God was leading, where and