

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Beha'alotcha  
June 13, 2020 \*\*\* 21 Sivan, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Beha'alotcha in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2181/jewish/Behaalotecha-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2181/jewish/Behaalotecha-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Aaron is commanded to raise light in the lamps of the menorah, and the tribe of Levi is initiated into the service in the Sanctuary.

A “Second Passover” is instituted in response to the petition “Why should we be deprived?” by a group of Jews who were unable to bring the Passover offering in its appointed time because they were ritually impure. G-d instructs Moses on the procedures for Israel’s journeys and encampments in the desert, and the people journey in formation from Mount Sinai, where they had been camped for nearly a year.

The people are dissatisfied with their “bread from heaven” (the manna), and demand that Moses supply them with meat. Moses appoints 70 elders, to whom he imparts of his spirit, to assist him in the burden of governing the people. Miriam speaks negatively of Moses, and is punished with leprosy; Moses prays for her healing, and the entire community waits seven days for her recovery.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Zechariah 2:14-4:7.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/598114/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/598114/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This haftarah contains a vision of the golden Temple Menorah, whose daily kindling is discussed in the opening of this week's Torah reading.

This prophecy was communicated by Zechariah shortly before the building of the Second Temple. The haftarah opens with a vivid depiction of the joy that will prevail when G-d will return to Jerusalem: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for, behold! I will come and dwell in your midst, says the L-rd."

The prophet then describes a scene in the Heavenly Court: Satan was seeking to incriminate Joshua, the first High Priest to serve in the Second Temple, because of the "soiled garments" (i.e. sins) he was wearing. G-d himself defends the High Priest: "And the Lord said to Satan: The Lord shall rebuke you, O Satan; the Lord who chose Jerusalem shall rebuke you. Is [Joshua] not a brand plucked from fire?" I.e., how dare Satan prosecute an individual who endured the hardships of exile? "And He raised His voice and said to those standing before him, saying, 'Take the filthy garments off him.' And He said to him, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I have clad you with clean garments.'"

G-d then proceeds to outline the rewards awaiting Joshua if he and his descendents

follow G-d's ways. The ultimate reward is, "Behold! I will bring My servant, the Shoot, " an allusion to Moshiach, the Shoot of David.

Zechariah then describes a vision of a golden seven-branched Menorah. An angel interprets the meaning of this vision: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel [descendent of King David, one of the protagonists in the building of the Second Temple], 'Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,' says the Lord of Hosts." Meaning that Zerubbabel's descendent, Moshiach, will have no difficulty in his task, it will be as simple as lighting a menorah.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### Loneliness and Faith (Beha'alotcha 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/behaalotcha-5780/>

I have long been intrigued by one passage in this week's parsha. After a lengthy stay in the Sinai desert, the people are about to begin the second part of their journey. They are no longer travelling from but travelling to. They are no longer escaping from Egypt; they are journeying toward the Promised Land.

The Torah inserts a long preface to this story: it takes the first ten chapters of Bamidbar. The people are counted. They are gathered, tribe by tribe, around the Tabernacle, in the order in which they are going to march. Preparations are made to purify the camp. Silver trumpets are made to assemble the people and to give them the signal to move on. Then finally the journey begins.

What follows is a momentous anti-climax. First there is an unspecified complaint (Num. 11:1-3). Then we read: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num. 11:4-6).

The people seem to have forgotten that in Egypt they had been slaves, oppressed, their male children killed, and that they had cried out to be freed by God. The memory Jewish tradition has preserved of the food they ate in Egypt was the bread of affliction and the taste of bitterness, not meat and fish. As for their remark that they ate the food at no cost, it did cost them something: their liberty.

There was something monstrous about this behaviour of the people and it induced in Moses what today we would call a breakdown:

**He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? ... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me —if I have found favour in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." (Num. 11:11-15)**

This was the lowest point in Moses' career. The Torah does not tell us directly what was happening to him, but we can infer it from God's reply. He tells him to appoint seventy

elders who would share the burden of leadership. Hence we must deduce that Moses was suffering from lack of companionship. He had become the lonely man of faith. He was not the only person in Tanach who felt so alone that he prayed to die. So did Elijah when Jezebel issued a warrant for his arrest and death after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:4). So did Jeremiah when the people repeatedly failed to heed his warnings (Jer. 20:14-18). So did Jonah when God forgave the people of Nineveh, seemingly making nonsense of his warning that in forty days the city would be destroyed (Jon. 4:1-3). The Prophets felt alone and unheard. They carried a heavy burden of solitude. They felt they could not go on.

Few books explore this territory more profoundly than Psalms. Time and again we hear King David's despair:

I am worn out from my groaning.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears. (Ps. 6:6)

How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me? (Ps. 13:1-2)

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

Why are You so far from saving me so far from my cries of anguish? (Ps. 22:2)

Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord... (Ps. 130:1)

And there are many more psalms in a similar vein.

Something similar can be traced in modern times. Rav Kook, when he arrived in Israel, wrote, "There is no one, young or old, with whom I can share my thoughts, who is able to comprehend my viewpoint, and this wearies me greatly." [1]

Even more candid was the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Near the beginning of his famous essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, he writes, starkly: "I am lonely." He continues, "I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the psalmist, 'My father and my mother have forsaken me,' ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove." [2] This is extraordinary language.

At times of loneliness, I have found great solace in these passages. They told me I was not alone in feeling alone. Other people had been here before me.

Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah and King David were among the greatest spiritual leaders who ever lived. Such, though, is the psychological realism of Tanach that we are given a glimpse into their souls. They were outstanding individuals, but they were still human, not superhuman. Judaism consistently avoided one of the greatest temptations of religion: to blur the boundary between heaven and earth, turning heroes into gods or demigods. The most remarkable figures of Judaism's early history did not find their tasks easy. They never lost faith, but sometimes it was strained almost to breaking point. It is the uncompromising honesty of Tanach that makes it so compelling.

The psychological crises they experienced were understandable. They were undertaking almost impossible tasks. Moses was trying to turn a generation forged in slavery into a free and responsible people. Elijah was one of the first Prophets to criticise kings.

Jeremiah had to tell the people what they did not want to hear. Jonah had to face the fact that Divine forgiveness extends even to Israel's enemies and can overturn prophecies of

doom. David had to wrestle with political, military and spiritual challenges as well as an unruly personal life.

By telling us of their strife of the spirit, Tanach is conveying something of immense consequence. In their isolation, loneliness, and deep despair, these figures cried out to God “from the depths,” and God answered them. He did not make their lives easier. But He did help them feel they were not alone.

Their very loneliness brought them into an unparalleled closeness to God. In our parsha, in the next chapter, God Himself defended Moses’ honour against the slights of Miriam and Aaron. After wishing to die, Elijah encountered God on Mount Horeb in a “still, small voice.” Jeremiah found the strength to continue to prophesy, and Jonah was given a lesson in compassion by God Himself. Separated from their contemporaries, they were united with God. They discovered the deep spirituality of solitude.

I write these words while most of the world is still in a state of almost complete lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. People are unable to gather. Children cannot go to school. Weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and funerals are deprived of the crowds that would normally attend them. Synagogues are closed. Mourners are unable to say Kaddish. These are unprecedented times.

Many are feeling lonely, anxious, isolated, deprived of company. To help, Natan Sharansky put out a video describing how he endured his years of loneliness in the Soviet Gulag as a prisoner of the KGB. From dozens of reports from those who endured it, including the late John McCain, solitary confinement is the most terrifying punishment of all. In the Torah, the first time the words “not good” appear are in the sentence “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

But there are uses of adversity, and consolation in loneliness. When we feel alone, we are not alone, because the great heroes of the human spirit felt this way at times – Moses, David, Elijah and Jonah. So did modern masters like Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik. It was precisely their loneliness that allowed them to develop a deeper relationship with God. Plumbing the depths, they reached the heights. They met God in the silence of the soul and felt themselves embraced.

This is not to minimise the shock of the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. Yet we can gain courage from the many individuals, from biblical times through to more modern ones, who felt their isolation deeply but who reached out to God and found God reaching out to them.

**I believe that isolation contains, within it, spiritual possibilities.** We can use it to deepen our spirituality. We can read the book of Psalms, re-engaging with some of the greatest religious poetry the world has ever known. We can pray more deeply from the heart. And we can find solace in the stories of Moses and others who had moments of despair but who came through them, their faith strengthened by their intense encounter with the Divine. It is when we feel most alone that we discover that we are not alone, “for **You are with me.**” [1] Igrot ha-Ra’ayah 1, 128. [2] Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Doubleday, 1992, 3.

[The Journey by Jan Uhrbach](http://www.jtsa.edu/the-journey)  
<http://www.jtsa.edu/the-journey>

How do we progress toward our goals? Individually and societally, how do we know when

to move forward, and which direction to go?

At first glance, the description of the Israelites' journey from Sinai to the Promised Land seems to offer a model of clarity and ease:

*Whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the place where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would encamp. **At the word of Adonai the Israelites journeyed, and at the word of Adonai they encamped** (עַל־פִּי ה' יִתְּנוּ וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ): they remained encamped as long as the cloud rested on the Mishkan. When the cloud lingered on the Mishkan many days, the Israelites observed Adonai's mandate and did not journey on. There were times when the cloud was over the Mishkan for a few days—**at the word of Adonai they encamped and at the word of Adonai they journeyed** (עַל־פִּי ה' יִתְּנוּ וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ). There were times when the cloud was there from evening until morning and would lift in the morning—they would journey. Whether day or night, when the cloud lifted they would journey. Whether two days or a month or a year—however long the cloud lingered on the Mishkan—the Israelites remained encamped and did not journey; only when it lifted did they break camp. **By the word of Adonai they encamped and by the word of Adonai they journeyed** (עַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִתְּנוּ); they observed Adonai's mandate by the word of Adonai through Moses. (Num. 9:17–23)*

It's a comforting solution—*just follow the word of God!*—but unfortunately, not especially helpful. If the Torah's message is eternal, what does this model offer those of us (i.e., *all* of us) to whom God doesn't "speak" quite so distinctly?

Fortunately, it's not the only answer the Torah provides. Intermingled with this description of a straightforward, unwavering journey at the clear command of God, the Torah offers also a counternarrative.

Looking more closely, we come to suspect that God's directions were anything but clear. Within this passage itself, God's "guidance" is expressed not in distinct speech, but through a cloud—a metaphor suggesting obfuscation, not clarity—and needs to be mediated or interpreted "through Moses." And immediately afterwards, we discover that additional navigational "technologies" are necessary:

- journeying instructions were given via trumpets specially crafted by Moses and blown by the *kohanim*. (10:1–8);
- the Ark of the Covenant traveled on ahead of them "to seek out a resting place for them" (10:33);  
and most tellingly,
- Moses pleaded with his father-in-law Hovav to be their human guide ("[Moses] said, 'Please do not abandon us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will be like eyes for us'.") (10:31).

In other words, the path forward is never clear, and God isn't a divine GPS. Revelation and faith shape our vision of where we want to go; they offer a compass pointing to true north, orienting us in the general direction of that vision. But to get there, we need maps, road signs, traffic signals, and human guides with a variety of expertise—religious and secular.

Similarly, although on the surface God "intended" and Israel expected that they would proceed directly and quickly to the Promised Land (per Rashi on 10:29, 10:33, within

three days), the counter-narrative suggests that was never a realistic vision. The commentators sensitively pick up on the challenges inherent even in what was supposed to be a short journey—most especially, the standing still and waiting, for an unknown time.

For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (on 9:16–23) writes: “it is not so much the strain of lengthy wanderings as the patient endurance of the lengthy stops which seem to be stressed as the real task of the tests.” Similarly, Ramban, Bahya, and Seforno highlight the uncertainty and unpredictability of the encampments as especially difficult to bear. The result was on the one hand impatient, self-reinforcing complaining about the current situation (11:1 ff), and on the other hand disastrous spying ahead into the future, sapping the community of courage and keeping them from moving forward (12:1 ff). Combined, they turned a short trek into a forty-year, roundabout journey.

Here again, the contrast between the idealized “intent” and the reality on the ground speaks directly to the human condition. A journey worth taking is never linear, never easy, and we never handle it perfectly. While it’s natural to fantasize about quick fixes, lasting transformation—true progress—takes time, and inevitably meanders through error, regression, and backlash. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, it is rarely as simple as “at the word of Adonai we journey, and at the word of Adonai we encamp.” Rather, our fears keep us stuck when we’re called to advance, and our impatience and inability to bear uncertainty push us ahead when we’re called to stand still.

Thankfully, Judaism offers a wide complement of navigational tools to hone our powers of discernment, make us more sensitive readers of the terrain we traverse, and keep us on the path. Torah study with a partner, prayer and meditation, halakhic observance, deeds of lovingkindness, the practice of *mussar* (character development), participation in Jewish community (live or virtual)—all function as the maps, signposts, and traffic signals we need. And they nourish our resilience when the road ahead looks frightening, or the waiting and uncertainty seem almost too much to bear.

And ideally, our errors become teachers and guides too. Of the many navigational technologies that the Israelites utilized in the wilderness, perhaps the oddest was the ark: “The Ark of the Covenant of Adonai traveled in front of them a three days’ distance, to seek out a resting place for them” (10:33). This presents a difficulty. Elsewhere (Num. 14:44) we learn that “the ark of the covenant of Moses and the Lord did not move from the midst of the camp.” How can the ark be in the middle of the camp, and also somehow travelling by itself three days ahead? In solving the problem, the Midrash (Sifrei Bemidbar 82) offers a profound lesson in how we progress toward our goals. There were two arks: One (with the tablets) stayed in the middle of the camp. A second ark proceeded ahead to seek out the encampments. And what was in that second ark? The broken tablets, destroyed by Moses on seeing the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:19).

The path to the future moves through the past. We look ahead in our travels only to discover that our mistakes and sins, our brokenness, are “three days’ journey ahead”—allowing us the benefit of critical distance, but waiting for us nevertheless. The ark with our brokenness tells us *where we need to stop and wait*—to explore the issues and places that need attention, rectification, and healing, in order to move forward again in the right direction. It takes courage, patience, and resilience. Perhaps this is why “the

place where they rested is also called *a journey*" (מְקוֹם הַנִּיַּתָּן אֲף הוּא קָרוֹי מַסָּע) (Rashi on Exod. 40:38). (Jan Uhrback is the Director of The Block/Kolker Center For Spiritual Arts at JTS)

### [Beha'alotcha: Selective Memory by Rabbi Jay Kelman](https://www.torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/behaalotcha-selective-memory)

<https://www.torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/behaalotcha-selective-memory>

It is amazing how selective our memory can be. People often yearn for the good old days: days full of poverty, pogroms and peddling. The ability to forget the difficulties of the past is a necessary tool for our mental well-being. It is that which allows us to put our lives back together and rebuild after personal or national tragedies.

We often choose to remember what suits us, conveniently forgetting those facts which upset our view of the world. No better example can be found than that of the generation of the Jews who left Egypt. While having their needs taken care of as they wandered in the desert, they found fault at every conceivable opportunity. It took just three days from their leaving Har Sinai to start the bickering. What are we doing here in the desert when life in Egypt was so much better was a constant refrain. "We fondly remember the fish that we could eat in Egypt at no cost", they exclaimed, "along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic", they continued. "But now our spirits are dried up, with nothing but the manna before our eyes" (Bamidbar 11:5-6).

Is this the true picture of life in Egypt? What happened to the slavery, the backbreaking work, and the babies tossed in the Nile? What about the excessive taxes, the breakdown of family life? The Torah (Shemot 5:18) tells us that the Egyptians did not even supply the necessary materials for the Jewish worker. Did these same Egyptians really supply free fish?

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for people to misrepresent the past or to tell an outright lie when it serves their purposes. When people are unhappy about the present they often compare it to a non-existent past, lamenting the perceived turn of events. While the Jews had to subsist on matza that was quickly forgotten. A rosy picture of the past is painted, justifying dissatisfaction with the present.

Many commentaries assume the Jewish people were not lying. Fish, fresh fruit and vegetables really were available for free in Egypt. However it was free for one reason only; to enable the Jews to have enough strength to do their hard work. A hungry slave cannot be a productive worker. The Egyptians ensured that we were not to be hungry. How tragic that the Jews remembered the good food but not the real price they had to pay for it.

This phenomenon is not unique to slaves. Many firms pay enormously high wages to attract the best. However, the benefits often come at a high cost in time, stress and spiritual growth. There really are no free lunches.

Rashi (Bamidbar 11:5), echoing the view of the Rabbis, declares that it was not fish and fruit that was the true source of their grumbling. Rather the "freedom" in Egypt to which they allude is freedom from responsibility. Chinam min hamitzvot, free from religious obligations, is how the Rabbis expressed the true feelings of the Jewish people. In Egypt there were no moral restraints or restrictions placed upon them. They could eat what they wanted, marry whomever they pleased, work seven days a week if they so desired and

did not have to share whatever abundance they may have had with others. All of a sudden they were now bound by laws governing every facet of their lives. For those to whom Torah is irrelevant no amount of suffering is tolerable. Just give us our freedom to do as we please, they plead. Those for whom Torah is a way of life realize that implementing Torah may at times entail discomfort and hardship. No worthwhile goal comes easily. And there is no goal more worthwhile than striving to apply the beauty of Torah to our daily lives.

Can We Go Back to Life Before Corona? Parshas Behaaloscha by Rabbi Wein  
<https://torah.org/torah-portion/rabbiwein-5780-behaaloscha/>

In this week's Torah reading we hear an oft repeated refrain uttered by many in the generation that found itself in the desert of Sinai. They said that we want to return to Egypt. The present is too difficult, and the future is too uncertain so let us go home to Egypt which we were familiar with and where we knew what to expect.

All human beings fear uncertainty. The future is always somewhat terrifying because of its unknown quality. We lack the self confidence to know that we can somehow overcome all difficulties, even those which are currently not apparent. There is always that inner voice within that bids us to attempt to return to a known past rather than to advance to an uncertain future.

This psychological weakness permeates the entire series of events which are reflected in the Chumash of Bamidbar. There is security in the past, even in a past that was not pleasant or congenial. We see this in the Jewish world today when people want to return to the eastern European past that can never be renewed, instead of attempting to create a great future which will be relevant to its time.

This statement of let us return to Egypt is therefore representative not only of the generation of the desert but it is something that we hear repeated often throughout all Jewish history and in our time as well. It is a seductive statement but a dangerous one. Even if we wish to do so, there never was an ability to return to Egypt and to recast the world as it once was instead of what it is.

As we emerge from the scourge of the Corona epidemic, we again hear within us the refrain to return to what was – to the world that we knew just a few short months ago. However, that is a false hope and an unrealistic view of the matter. No matter how we will judge current events there can be no question that the world has changed and that certainties we had may no longer remain. It is the uncertainty of the future that is now descending upon us that makes us anxious and somewhat frightened.

Human beings and especially the Jewish People are extremely adaptable and capable of facing the challenges of the unknown future. It is within our power to renew our self confidence and to proclaim that we are willing and able to undertake building a newer and morally healthy and humanly beneficial society. Because of this we will have an opportunity that has not been granted too many times, to mold and shape the Jewish future in a productive and holy fashion. We should appreciate having such an opportunity and make certain that we do not squander it on nostalgia and, even worse, on repeating errors of the past. Going back to Egypt has never been a positive solution.

## [Second Chances – Parshat Beha'alotcha by Rabbi Eve Posen](https://rabbieve.com/2020/06/12/second-chances/#comments)

<https://rabbieve.com/2020/06/12/second-chances/#comments>

Event organizers all around the world have been facing the same dilemma for months: to cancel or to reschedule. If an event is canceled, what does that mean for attendees? Do they receive a full refund? For charitable events or nonprofit organizations, are they offered the opportunity to consider previous payments a donation? And if an event is rescheduled, how far into the future does it need to be? Do you even bother trying to schedule it for the fall, or simply wait until the same time next year?

Sadly, COVID-19 has either delayed or canceled countless plans and events, which of course is to be expected if we're going to try to lessen the toll it takes on human life. However, in many cases what COVID-19 has given us is a chance for a redo on things we may have missed out on.

Interestingly, there's a direct parallel in the Torah this week about postponing or extending celebrations because of illness. This week we read *Parshat Beha'alotcha*, a turning point in our narrative. This section of text begins with instruction for the purification of the Levites as they do their holy work in the Tabernacle. We read about the first Passover sacrifice in the wilderness and how to celebrate Passover if we miss it the first time around. Then the text turns toward the Tabernacle, the *Mishkan*, and teaches us that God's presence hovers over it in a cloud. Finally, Moshe's family – his father-in-law, wife, and children – return to join him and the rest of the Israelite nation on their journey through the wilderness. It is in the return of his family to the camp where we learn about what unrealistic expectations have been levied against Moshe.

The Torah, in elevating the Israelite nation, recognizes that life sometimes gets the best of us and a second chance is needed. Chapter 9, verses 6-12 describe a second Passover observance that happens exactly one month after the first Passover. Not everyone celebrates this one because it exists specifically for those who were unable to celebrate actual Passover because of sickness or impurity. The Torah argues: why must these people miss out on a great opportunity to honor God and join their community? So, second Passover, or *Pesach Sheni*, is born. The Torah reminds us that missing out because of another major obligation doesn't mean that we don't care. And not every holiday or event can be made up in its entirety, but if we can create an opportunity for everyone to be included, we should.

Unfortunately, sometimes when you have to pick and choose, there are no second chances to make up what you missed. This week's Torah portion reminds us of how meaningful those second chances can be, and perhaps this year is an opportunity to reexamine our priorities to make sure we don't take first chances for granted.

## [Lighting Us Up: Theology, Pluralism and Becoming the Menorah: By Rabbi David Markus](https://ajrsem.org/2019/06/parashat-behaalotekha-5779/)

<https://ajrsem.org/2019/06/parashat-behaalotekha-5779/>

What does God need of our spirituality, what do we need of it, and how do we know? These questions cast long theological shadows across sacred tradition, and efforts at clarity often generate more heat than light.

It's with those questions in mind that I read of Parashat Beha'alotekha's seven-branch gold menorah, symbol of Jewish peoplehood and the modern State of Israel.

Why seven branches? The parashah doesn't say. God just tells Moses to instruct Aaron: "In your lifting the lamps (beha'alotekha et ha-neirot) to light, let seven lamps shine at the front of the menorah" (Numbers 8:2). The fact of the menorah's "seven" is assumed. Torah continues that the menorah should look as previously described – alluding to the design God showed Moses at Sinai (Exodus 25:40). There too, however, Torah doesn't say why seven branches.

Do the menorah branches evoke Jewish time (Creation's seven days)? Jewish space (antiquity's seven celestial spheres, which was Josephus' answer)? Jewish encounters with God (branches evoking the Tree of Life or the Burning Bush)? A mystical journey of seven spiritual qualities (i.e. the seven lower sefirot, which inspire seven-week counting practices from Passover to Shavuot and from Tisha b'Av to Rosh Hashanah)?

So many possibilities, no single answer, and none of them clear. What irony that the menorah, familiar light symbol of Jewishness, should be shrouded in such mystery! This mystery is fitting. It hints that our identity symbols – and all we spiritually bring to light – inherently arise in Mystery. Rather than a familiar but false light of certainty, the menorah radiates questions sparked by Mystery. Rather than a single Jewish path, the menorah's branches depict a pluralism that invokes Unity.

Which begs another question: who needs such a menorah – God, or us? Talmud holds that God doesn't need it (B.T. Menahot 86b), but leaves us guessing if or why we do.

One midrash also casts light on the menorah mystery of multiple wicks. Tanhuma offers that we can only spread light that already exists. Spiritually speaking, only God creates light from darkness: we can't. That's why the menorah has multiple wicks – to remind us that we spread light from candle to candle (soul to soul) rather than creating light from scratch. In just that way, the menorah's multiple wicks are for us (Tanhuma,

Beha'alotekha 5:1a), to teach us who we are relative to God. We are God's light workers. Take that in. The menorah, and any spiritual symbol, teaches us who we are relative to God. If we spread "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6), it's only because God creates that light. Whatever spiritual light we reflect, the light itself is God's creation – not ours.

When we live that way – as humble vessels for a light we know and feel transcending us – we fulfill the Psalmist's call to know that God is the creator, not we ourselves (Psalms 100:3). Then the word beha'alotekha itself transforms from "In your lifting the lamps" to "In lifting you as the lamps" (Tanhuma, Beha'alotekha 5:1b). As we radiate spiritual light knowing that only God creates it, we ourselves get lifted and lit up.

Maybe that's why we need the menorah and why God needs us: to radiate the spiritual light we receive as conscious witnesses and clear conduits. And maybe that's why Torah's phrase beha'alotekha et ha-neirot is missing a letter. Ha-neirot ("the candles"), usually spelled הנרות, instead appears as הנרת without a vav – the letter that literally is a connector and figuratively is a wick. We learn that Torah calls us to be that connector, the wick that lifts God's light. That's how Torah calls us together to become a menorah.

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Good homiletics, maybe – but is it sound theology? Can we really infer so much about God, and our relationship with God, from sacred text's depiction of a golden symbol?

An ostensibly rationalist Maimonides thought so when he tackled another of Torah's golden symbols – the two gold cherubs atop the Ark (Exodus 25:18-21). To Maimonides, the fact of two cherubs showed that the cherubs were not God. Only God is One, so two cherubs can't be God precisely because there were two of them. The Ark's two cherubs thus taught about God not from any surface vision but by challenging us to see those sacred symbols deeply, for what they were not (Guide for the Perplexed III, 45:2). Whatever we make of Maimonides' apophatic theology (sacred awareness by negation), his teaching about the cherubs shines on the menorah and much else in spiritual life. We can learn to see beyond mere appearance, especially when what we're seeing is our own sacred tradition. We can learn to see with God-lit eyes that all multiplicities point to the One we call God – but themselves are not worthy of worship. Thus we can learn to see “outside the curtain, witnessing [the holy, as the menorah's multiple wicks are] the testimony that the Divine Presence dwells among [us]” (B.T. Menahot 86b). Learning to see outside the curtain of surface appearance is our sacred calling, our spiritual response to a divinity that by definition transcends all appearance however bright and golden. Far more than casting any particular light unto the nations, the menorah calls us to see divine Oneness into being among the many. And when we do, when we see every spiritual symbol and every soul as a pointer to the ultimate Source of Light, we can't help but light up! V'nizkeh khulanu m'heirah l'oro — May all of speedily merit to shine with that light. [This d'var is from 5779](Rabbi David Evan Markus (AJR Adjunct Faculty – Rabbinics) is co-rabbi of Temple Beth El of City Island (New York, NY) and Founding Builder of Bayit: Your Jewish Home, a spiritual innovation start-up for all ages and stages. Rabbi Markus also serves as Faculty in Spiritual Direction and past Board Co-Chair for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. By day, Rabbi Markus presides as Judicial Referee in New York Supreme Court, 9th Judicial District, as part of a parallel career in government service.)

### Yahrtzeits

Melita Peckman remembers her mother Regina Rostoker (Ester Rivka) on Sunday June 14<sup>th</sup> (Sivan 22).

Fran Nelson remembers her father Lewis Rapaport (Yehudah Leib (hakohan Naftali and Feigah) on Tuesday June 16<sup>th</sup> (Sivan 24).