

B'Ha'alotekha 5767

Rabbi Marci Jacobs

I must confess that this parasha, above all others, is special to me. This was the parasha that was read the Shabbat I became a bat mitzvah. I still think of B'Ha'alotekha as “my” parasha, of the Haftarah from Zechariah as “my” haftarah. During the year that I prepared to celebrate my Bat Mitzvah, I was more focused on the doing: learning to *leyn*, to chant from the Haftarah, to lead services; and less focused on the lessons of my parasha. If you asked me at age 12 what my parasha was about, I would have said that it had something to do with the Menorah, that Miriam and Aaron were in there somewhere, and that one of the prominent characters was named Eldad—that detail I remembered because one of my teachers at Schechter was also named Eldad. Looking back, I find it ironic that I didn't have a stronger connection to the message of the parasha, as the teenage me had much in common with the stories at the center of this Shabbat's Torah reading. When boiled down to its very essence, Parashat B'Ha'alotekha is about complaining.

Complaining was how I and my closest friends made it through our teenage years. When our parents imposed restrictions on us we deemed unfair, we complained. When our teachers gave us too much homework, we

complained. Occasionally, we would sit for hours at a local coffee shop and just *kvetch* about the injustices and disappointments confronting us. As a bunch of overachieving and privileged kids, we didn't talk much about our successes, or when things went the way we wanted. That was the way it was supposed to be, and therefore wasn't worth mentioning. Complaining was the way we gave voice to our sadness and confusion when things didn't turn out as we had hoped. From time to time, our complaints were more constructive—less about venting and more about effecting positive change. When we felt that our mock trial team was unfairly judged in competition, we complained. When our teachers scheduled exams for days that coincided with Jewish holidays, we raised our voices in dissent. Now that I am no longer a teenager myself, but a teacher of adolescents, I have heard my share of complaints. Some are about responding to perceived injustices, some are about trying to resolve a conflict or a disappointment, and some are simply about *kvetching*, about getting something painful, sad or just annoying off one's chest. Complaining is a part of who we are, and of how we grow, particularly as we experience change.

And so in today's parasha we find *b'nei yisrael*, in what might be termed the adolescence of their development as a nation, mired in

complaints, overwhelmed by *kvetching*. They complain about impurity, about the poor menu options, about wanting the kinds of tasty and varied food they had in Egypt, about prophecy being extended to other leaders, about Moses himself. They complain so much and so bitterly that Moses takes on assistants, 70 leaders from the tribes, to assist him in managing his burden.

In the midst of all this *kvetching*, the Torah brings us an unusual interjection. Set off by two backwards *nuns* are the verses we say to begin and end the Torah service. ויהי בנסע הארץ ויאמר משה קומה ה' ויפצו אויביך וינסו משנאיך מפניך—When the Ark set out, Moses would say: Advance O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before you! And ובנחה יאמר שובה ה' רבבות אלפי ישראל—And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!

These verses seem to be calls for God's protection. Earlier in the parasha, Israel's journey through the desert is recalled. We read of their travels from place to place. These two *pesukim*, then, seem more fitting for that kind of situation. Upon setting out, with the Ark leading the way, Moses would pray thus for God's presence to help make their journey an easy one, one free from enemy attack. And when they would camp, Moses would pray for God's presence and protection as they rested up for the next

phase of the journey. Given where they actually do appear, in the midst of Israel's complaints, these two verses seem out of place. The two backwards *nuns* also draw our attention, adding to our sense that there is something unusual about these verses. And indeed there is.

The first thing we see when approaching these verses is the two backwards *nuns* that bookend them. These two letters, unique in their appearance in the Torah, tell us a lot about the thrust of the verses they contain. Rashi explains that the *nuns* signify that these verses are in the wrong place. As we suspected, they don't belong here. Why then, do they appear? Rashi, as is his way, points us to the Talmud's explanation, that these verses serve as a barrier between two calamities, the second calamity being the bitter complaints of the Israelites, and the first calamity being their departure from 'הר ה', from the mountain of God, or Sinai, two verses above. This departure doesn't at first read as calamitous. Setting off on their journey through the desert is a step toward the land of Israel, a step in the direction of completion and redemption. The Talmud clarifies the matter, describing how *b'nei yisrael* didn't just leave the place they associated with God, they left God. These are strong words, and a harsh judgment against the people of Israel. The proof for this conclusion lies in the second calamity, the constant complaints that follow this section.

That the Israelites complained isn't itself troublesome. As we well know, complaining is a part of being human, of being a part of a community, and of coping with change. It can even be constructive. *B'nei yisrael*, in the desert, with few visible sustaining resources, were likely to be uncomfortable and concerned about their future—a good recipe for *kvetching*. It is the way in which Israel complained, however, that revealed their departure from God. Remembering the bounteous food in Egypt, and comparing their situation then to the situation they now faced, they concluded that *בפשונו יבשה*, their souls were dried up. Given a choice, they would have rather been back in Egypt, enslaved, without a covenantal connection with God, than wandering in the desert under God's protection. They weren't complaining to try to improve their situation, or even simply to vent their frustration, according to this view. Their complaints were an expression that they were no longer invested in the journey to the Promised Land. They were no longer invested in the destiny of their community. They were complaining about something that was no longer theirs. They had, indeed, left God. And that is definitely calamitous.

Reading these two passages one after the other would be a disturbing enterprise. The *וייהי בנסע* passage, surrounded as it is by these two *nuns*, gives us a chance to come up for air, to remember God's protecting

presence, as we steel ourselves for diving back into a passage that rejects that very notion. This small section of Torah teaches us a powerful lesson about what not to do. Complaining, if it is to be effective and not calamitous, must not be undertaken as an outsider. *B'nei yisrael's* crucial error was that they took themselves out of the game, as it were, when bringing their complaints to Moses and to God. Complaining from outside the community, they showed no interest in working to improve their situation; it was merely how they gave voice to their rejection of God. As we can see from God's responses of anger, plague, and fire, this sort of complaining did not get them very far.

Knowing what not to do is very useful knowledge, but if we are to understand complaining as a natural and even positive part of being in a community, we must explore it further, perhaps learning not only what not to do, but also what to do. For this we can also turn to the two mysterious *nuns* that insert themselves in our parasha.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, known as the Kedushat Levi, gives us insight on how to share complaints. The Berditchever, who lived from 1740 to 1810, was no stranger to the art of complaining. He was well known for standing before God in anger and pain, accusing God of being too harsh on the people, God's children, and pleading for an end to the cruelties of

exile. It is no surprise then, that Levi Yitzhak saw something else entirely in these two letters. He explains that the *nun* represents **יְרֵאָה**, reverence for God, due to its bent over stature. In general, people should not wear their piety on their sleeves, as this can be seen as arrogant. However, in certain cases, one's piety and reverence for God should be obvious. The placement of the *nuns* here, in the midst of what could be seen as calamitous complaining, teaches us that this is one of those moments. The *nuns*, and the verses they hold, re-insert the senses of awe, of reverence, and investment that are so absent in the complaints that follow. For Levi Yitzhak, complaints against God are expressions of displeasure, to be sure, but also of partnership and respect. Furthermore, revealing our **יְרֵאָה** in this way has the power to lift the *nitzotzot*, the sparks of divinity that were scattered in the world due to a cosmic accident during creation, back to their heavenly homes. By infusing our complaints with this sense of **יְרֵאָה**, we not only indicate our desire to partner with God, to be a part of the solution to what troubles us, but we also participate in perfecting the world. These *nuns*, and the reverence they represent, add a tremendous how-to lesson to our understanding of what it means to complain.

This parasha resonates so deeply for me, both because it takes me back to my own milestones, and because complaining is such a natural part

of communal existence. All people and all communities find, at different points in their journeys, causes for dissatisfaction and complaint. May we do so following the example of the *nuns*, whose humble expression of *יראה*, of reverence, is a force for perfecting our world.

Shabbat Shalom.