

# Haftarot Unrolled: Beha'alotcha

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## The Light in Our Midst

Parshat Beha'alotcha begins with the commandment to light the Menorah in the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Haftarah of Beha'alotcha also talks about the Menorah, relating Zechariah's vision of the Menorah with two olive trees around it. The Haftarah does not begin directly with the Menorah, but rather with the following verses:

רְנִי וְשִׂמְחִי בַת צִיּוֹן כִּי הִנְנִי בָא וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּתוֹכְךָ נֹאֵם ה' . וְנָלוּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים אֶל ה' בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְהָיוּ  
לִי לְעָם וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּתוֹכְךָ

Sing and rejoice, Daughter of Zion! For I am coming, and I will dwell in your midst, says Hashem. Many nations will attach to Hashem on that day, and become My people; and I will dwell in your midst ... (Zechariah 2:14-15)

"I will dwell in your midst" was the purpose that G-d gave for building the Mishkan, when it was first introduced back in Terumah. Behaalotcha describes the last stages of its dedication, and the commandment to light the Menorah is the last step of that dedication. Chazal explain that the order of events were as follows: as soon as Moshe finished putting up the Mishkan, it was covered by the cloud of G-d's Presence, signifying the fulfilment of "I will dwell in your midst." Hashem called Moshe and told him to enter the Mishkan, within the cloud, in order to receive more commandments. The first of those was the commandment to light the Menorah:

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה זָאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת  
Speak to Aharon and tell him: as you raise the candles toward the face of the Menorah, seven candles will give light. (Bamidbar 8:2)

Once the Mishkan was functional, and "I will dwell in your midst" came to pass, the next step is lighting the Menorah. Similarly, in the Haftarah, the prophet is told, "I will dwell in your midst," and then he is shown a vision of the Menorah. Once G-d dwells in our midst, the Jewish People must respond by lighting the Menorah. For whom do we light these candles?

The Midrash on Beha'alotcha asks the following question: the candles that Aharon lights face inwards "towards the face of the Menorah", not outwards, as if they are lit for G-d Himself. But, asks the Midrash, what need does G-d have of our light? He is the source of all light, it was the very first thing He created, why does He want us to light candles for Him each day?

אָמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי הַקִּבְיָה רַב־שׁוּ״ע לָנוּ אַתָּה אוֹמֵר שְׁנָאִיר לִפְנִיךָ אַתָּה הוּא אוֹר שֶׁל עוֹלָם ...  
וְאַתָּה אוֹמֵר אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה הוּא כִּי אַתָּה תֹאִיר נֹרִי אִמְרָה לָהֶם הַקִּבְיָה לֹא שְׁאִנִּי צָרִיךְ לָכֶם  
אַל־אֶשְׁתָּאִיר לִי כְּדֹרֶךְ שֶׁהָאֵרְתִּי לָכֶם

Israel said to G-d, "Master of the Universe! You're telling us to light before You, when You are the Light of the Universe..." And You say, "raise the candles toward the face of the Menorah!". ...G-d said to them, "It's not that I need you, but rather that you should light for Me like I lit for you."

The Midrash asserts that our light is meant to reciprocate the light that G-d lit for us on the way in the desert. Parshat Behaalotcha describes the signal used for the camp to travel:

או ימים או חדש או ימים    בהאריך הענן על המשכן לשכן עליו    יחנו בני ישראל ולא יסעו  
ובהעלתו יסעו

Or two days or a month or a year, if the cloud would be dwelling for a long time on the Mishkan, B'nei Yisrael would camp and not travel, and as it would rise, they would travel (Bamidbar 9:22)

The cloud that represented the Presence of G-d would rise above the Mishkan, and direct the way for the Jewish People in the desert. At night, this cloud appeared as a pillar of fire (Shemot 40:38), and lit their way. When G-d requested that we light the Menorah, it was to reciprocate Him lighting our way in the desert. The Midrash brings a parable to explain this:

משל למה הדבר דומה לפיקח וסומא שהיו מהלכין בדרך אמר לו פיקח לסומא כשנכנס לתוך הבית צא והדלק לי את הנר הזה והאיר לי אמר לו הסומא בטובתך כשהייתי בדרך אתה היית מסמכני עד שנכנסנו לתוך הבית אתה היית מלווה אותי ועכשיו אתה אומר הדלק לי את הנר הזה והאיר לי אמר לו הפקח שלא תהא מחזיק לי טובה שהייתי מלווה בדרך לכך אמרתי לך האיר לי

What is the analogy? A sighted person and a blind person who were travelling together. When they got to the house, the sighted one said to the blind one, "Go light a candle for me". The blind one said, "All the time we were on the road, you led me and supported me, now you ask me to light you a candle?!" He said, "So that you shouldn't be indebted to me that I accompanied you on the road."

The relationship between G-d and the Jewish People must not be entirely one-sided. There is a component that comes from G-d giving to us, and there is a component that comes from our actions, giving, as it were, to Him. Lighting the Menorah is the action that parallels G-d's pillar of light.

The cloud of G-d's Presence is a remarkable thing, a visible manifestation of a spiritual phenomenon. It was necessary for its time, both on a practical and on a spiritual level, but there was no way that such a situation could exist in perpetuity. Once the Jewish People entered the Land of Israel, the cloud was no longer needed, and it disappeared. But the Menorah remained, and we continued to demonstrate our part of the relationship by lighting the candles, for G-d.

When Shlomo built the Temple, the cloud of G-d's Presence appeared again to signal G-d's acceptance of it as His House. At the time of Zechariah, the prophet of the Haftarah, the second Temple was being rebuilt, but the visible sign of G-d's Presence did not appear. One of the fears of the Jewish People was that G-d did not accept this new Temple. That is why the Haftarah goes out of its way to reassure the Jewish People that G-d would indeed dwell in their midst. It is also why Zechariah is shown a vision of the Menorah. Even when the cloud is not visible, the light of the Menorah affirms G-d dwelling in our midst. The Menorah represents our role as His people, to do what He asks of us, not because He needs us to, but because it binds us to Him.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל נטע בן נתן פנחס בן מורי פנחס