

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Beha'alotcha, Numbers, Chapters 8-12

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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Hark What Heroism Can Follow: Small Moments and the Course of History

In a conversation with my friend, the great historian Andrew Roberts, I once asked Andrew to reflect on the contingencies in history—how one seemingly small event could have enormous implications for what occurred in the future. In response, he cited a wonderful phrase from one of Shakespeare's less famous plays, one that contains some of his greatest political insights. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses, comparing events to an orchestra, describes how one discordant note can ruin everything:

untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!

We bear this in mind when we study our reading this week, which presents us with a series of stories that at first glance seem utterly unrelated to one another. In a justifiably famous lecture on this *parashah*—perhaps the best-known of any of his *parashah* homilies—Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik described the dizzying display of disparate tales it contains:

We simply are perplexed. How many stories are in B'ha'alot'kha? One story or many stories? If there is one, there must be transition; if there is no transition, if there is no gradual and systematic development of a theme, then there is no unity. Whoever writes a composition paper, in first year English, knows that there must be unity. Unity is when a theme is developed. Prima facie, there is no development of anything and there is no literary unity. There are many stories. But each story per se is half a story, not a complete story. . . . I had a feeling when the Ba'al Qeriah (Torah reader) was reading the Sedra [the weekly reading], as if we were jumping like a bee on a clear warm summer morning from flower to flower accumulating the sweet nectar. Is it possible that the principle of the unity of the Torah, the unity of the themes which the Torah develops was lost in Parashat B'ha'alot'kha? It is an impossibility. (Transcribed by Yitzchak Etshalom)

In the end Soloveitchik observed that the reading, rightly understood, presents us with a series of events that indicate a destiny about to be achieved, when a misstep sets all of Jewish history awry, an “untuned string” that set the stage for all discord to follow. As he put it:



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The Parasha is one story, one tragic story. A tragic story which changes Jewish history completely, from top to bottom.

“[Rabbi Joseph B.] Soloveitchik observed that the reading, rightly understood, presents us with a series of events that indicate a destiny about to be achieved, when a misstep sets all of Jewish history awry . . .

Let us, building on Rabbi Soloveitchik's explication, see how this is so. As the reading begins, we are treated to the splendid social and spiritual state of the Israelites. We are told of the gleaming menorah, made of a single piece of beaten gold. Rightly understood, the glorious candelabra with which the *parashah* begins is a metaphor for the Jewish people at this moment: like the lights of the menorah, they

are aligned in a single whole. Indeed, one of the next stories, in which some Israelites who were ritually impure bemoan the fact that they cannot join the entire people in bringing the Passover offering, is itself a sublime symbol of covenantal unity.

Thus the stage is set for the glorious march to the Holy Land, which is described in detail. Trumpets are crafted in order to signal the march, which is led by God Himself:

And whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel encamped. At the command of the Lord the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the Lord they encamped; as long as the cloud rested over the Tabernacle, they remained in camp. (Numbers 9:17–18)

Moses, assuming that the entry into the land is imminent, urges his extended family to join them:

And Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, I will give it to you; come with us, and we will do you good; for the Lord has promised good to Israel. But he said to him, I will not go; I will depart to my own land and to my kindred. And he said, Do not leave us, I pray you, for you know how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us. And if you go with us, whatever good the Lord will do to us, the same will we do to you. (Numbers 10:29–32)

This conversation, Rabbi Soloveitchik notes, reflects the excitement that Moses feels at this moment. As if to signal the feeling that the march could not be halted, we then read the description, made famous by the synagogue liturgy, of how the Ark of the Covenant would travel:

And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, Arise, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel. (Numbers 10:35–36)



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But, immediately after this passage, a discordant note is sounded: first complaints emerge against the Almighty, and then an intense, hedonistic desire seizes the people:

And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes; and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled. . . . Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving; and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, O that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at. (Numbers 11:1–6)

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, this hedonistic desire is an embodiment of the pagan impulse, even if the actual sin of idol worship, in Hebrew “*avodah zarah*,” is not committed:

Paganism is not the worship of an idol, it encompasses more—a certain style of life.

What is the pagan way of life, in contradistinction to the Torah way of life? The pagan cries for variety for boundlessness for unlimited lust and insatiable desire. . . . The unlimited desire, which the Greeks call *hedone*, is the worst desire in Man. When Man reaches out for the unreachable, for the orgiastic and hypnotic, then they don't violate the prohibition of *Avodah Zarah*, but they adopt the pagan way of life; and the Torah hated the pagan way of life more than it hated the idol. Because an idol cannot exist for a long time, it cannot last. Finally, an intelligent person realizes that it is just wood and metal; it has no life. *Avodah Zarah* per se is short-lived, however the pagan way of life has a tremendous attraction for people.

At this point Moses himself despairs, and asks of God that others be appointed to help him bear the challenges of leadership, which means, for Rabbi Soloveitchik, that he began to question his own ability to fulfill all that biblical leadership required.

Interestingly, if one looks at the original context of the abovementioned quotation from *Troilus and Cressida*, one discerns that the larger discussion there is about rank, or as Ulysses calls it, “degree.” The rhetoric warns that when the hierarchy within society is undermined, even a bit, what follows is anarchy. Society is compared to the solar system, in which even the planets obey rules, circling in constant motion—unless they don't, which was believed to cause disorder in the world:

but when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture! O, when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,



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The enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!

Of course, biblical politics, in many ways, obliterated the usual notion of rank as it existed in the ancient world, and emphasized that all human beings are created in the image of the one God. But one hierarchical aspect of Israelite society was absolutely essential, and that was Moses' role as the representative of the Almighty, the only prophet who spoke to God face to face. Moses understands that the discordant note that is sounded reflects a lack of faith in him and by the end of the week's reading, in a sad way, this doubting of his singular status is even evident, in a much more limited way, within his own family. Though obviously understanding that Moses speaks directly with the Lord, his siblings nevertheless have a discussion in which they seem to equate their own spiritual level with their brother's:

And they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?
(Numbers 12:2)

Sadly, this will be followed, in the readings to come, by challenges to the authority of Moses that will be much worse: the story of the spies, in which Israelite leaders question Moses' assurance that the Holy Land can be conquered; and the rabble raised by Korah, who accuse Moses of nepotism in appointing Aaron as high priest.

Our *parashah* describes a glorious entry into the Land of Israel that was about to take place when sin suddenly pushed the people of Israel off course. In the Torah scroll, the passage describing the march of the ark is bracketed by odd-looking letters—the Hebrew letter *nun*, reversed, as if looking backwards. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, this means that all of Jewish history became inverted:

[T]he march was inverted. Instead of the march bringing them closer to Eretz Yisrael, the march took them away from Eretz Yisrael.

Israel would wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Thus the lesson of our reading is indeed:

untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!

It is all very depressing. And yet there is a larger lesson here, one which is stirring and inspiring. Just as one harmful moment can set events entirely off course, so too can one moment of courage, or eloquence, or forthrightness, set into motion a series of events that are redemptive.



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One example of this is described in my book, *Providence and Power*, in which I describe how Louis Brandeis was originally utterly uninterested in Zionism, and believed that public Jewishness was inappropriate. His only example of someone who proudly embraced Jewish identity was his late uncle Lewis Dembitz, an early supporter of Abraham Lincoln and a devoutly observant Jew. Several years before World War I, Brandeis was visited at Cape Cod by a journalist named Jacob de Haas. De Haas was a dedicated Zionist and had served as secretary to Theodor Herzl, but the purpose of his visit was only to interview the prominent attorney concerning the most anodyne of subjects: insurance law. Following the interview, as Brandeis was driving him to the train station, de Haas offhandedly inquired whether he might be related to Lewis Dembitz, whom he, de Haas, had come to know as a fellow Zionist. Something, seemingly catalyzed by the mention of an uncle who had passed away in 1907, stirred within Brandeis. In his 1983 book *Israel in the Mind of America*, Peter Grose summarizes the significance of the moment:

“He was a noble Jew,” De Haas remembers saying [about Dembitz], and the remark caught Brandeis up short—what did he mean by that? And what was the man Herzl like, whom De Haas had served in his younger days? Brandeis turned the car around, urged de Haas back home for lunch and more talk. From this conversation, August 13, 1912, is traditionally dated Brandeis’s “conversion” to Zionism.

De Haas did not need to bring up Brandeis’s uncle and Zionism, but he did. Soon after, Brandeis emerged as a Zionist leader, and, as I discuss in the book, his relationship with the British foreign minister during the war was critical to what became known as the Balfour Declaration. One conversation forged a Jewish leader; one uncle’s example for his nephew helped bring about a new understanding for Brandeis about what it means to be an American Jew.

Jewish history abounds with stories like this, and they remind us that even if one wrong note can create decades of discord, one small voice, putting forward all for which the Jewish people stand, can suddenly bring about a historical harmony in history. We are often unaware of the profound power of the examples each of us can set, and how we can inspire by the way we live. Let us then strive to sound courageous notes in the symphony of history, for we never know the impact that we can have.

Additional Resources

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on *Parashat Beha'alotcha*, Transcribed by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, “Rav Soloveitchik’s Lecture on Leadership,” Originally Delivered on June 10, 1974. [Click here to read.](#)



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