

## **BeHalotecha – 5783**

The central part of our religious services is the Torah reading. The tradition of reading the Torah publicly began with Ezra the Scribe, as he is referred to, after the return of the Jewish people from their Babylonian exile after the destruction of the first Temple. Tradition suggests that it was Ezra who pulled together all the various pieces of the story and put them into a cohesive whole so that they could make the greatest impact on the Jewish people as they overcame the loss of their Jewish identity during their years in Babylon. For obvious reasons, it became tradition NOT to keep the congregation waiting until the rabbis were where they were supposed to be in the story, from week to week. There evolved any number of restrictions and expectations and folkways about how and when and who and what was to be read. Some of those expectations were obviously adopted by the men and women who preceded us as leaders in this congregation. We have six Torah scrolls because eventually one got worn down and it is forbidden to read from a Torah that is pasul which means unkosher because letters cannot be properly deciphered. We also have six because of the ban on making people wait for the right place to be found while those on the bimah rolled a scroll from location to location. Imagine how long the congregation would have to have waited to go from the end of a single scroll to the beginning again on Simchat Torah and then again in the a.m. when the reading is repeated. It doesn't take much imagination to see how having more than one Torah would be a huge step up on the waiting thing and keep the congregation from drifting away.

Usually, I try very hard to make sure that we are in the right location in the Torah scroll we use all the time, the scroll donated by Leo and Ruth

Possen, both of Blessed Memory, and which many of us participated in the completing of by donating to enable us to stand with the scribe who came especially to St. Catharines to complete the physical writing of the last chapter of Devarim. That is why we take the time to roll ahead to the beginning of each new parsha before we lift and tie and dress the scroll. I also take the time to check in our luach, or diary, which shows the section to be read on Thursday morning and I use a special book to help me find the exact location of where the reading is supposed to begin. This week's parsha for instance, is called BeHalotecha, but the word which gives the name to the parsha, unlike so many other parshiot, begins on the second line so looking for the start is a complicated process. But I try to make sure the chumash at the reader's podium to my left and the podium below the bima is where it needs to be for the following week.

I happened to read the instructions in the Luach for this week's parsha and as soon as I read them, I knew that is where I wanted to begin. But what I thought about all week is not where I ended up this week in my writing. The luach tells the user to chant the verses that begin chapter 11 in a somewhat subdued voice to minimize the embarrassment the congregants experience upon hearing the terrible misdeeds of our ancestors. I thought.... oh great...I am going to talk about the traditions around the reading of the Torah from week to week and the use of special melodies when we read the Tochecha for instance which predicts the terrible punishments for not obeying the word of HaShem and the song to use when we read the Song of Moses as they crossed the Sea or Reeds during the exodus from Egypt. But as I began to do my research and ponder where to begin, I found myself going down a different path entirely.

First let's examine what it is that we are supposed to read so quietly.

“Why have You brought this evil on Your servant? Why have I failed to find favour in Your eyes, that You have placed the burden of this whole people on me? Did I conceive this whole people? Did I give birth to it, that You should say to me, ‘Carry it in your lap as a nurse carries a baby?’ ... Where can I find meat to give to this whole people when they cry to me saying, ‘Give us meat to eat?’ I cannot carry this whole people on my own. It is too heavy for me. If this is what You are doing to me, then, if I have found favour in Your eyes, kill me now, and let me not look upon this my evil.”

#### [Num. 11:11-15](#)

Why is Moses so upset? The reality of what has come to pass has hit the Israelites and they are aware of the fact that they no longer have access to the diet they had, even in slavery, in Egypt. They have been condemned to wandering in the desert for 40 years until they all die off and their children who have no knowledge of slavery are left to complete the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. They have no one to blame except Moses and he has been the recipient of all their cries of woe. Think about how Trudeau feels now about the results of the inquiry into foreign interference. Think about Kevin McCarthy now as he deals with the aftermath of the agreement reached over the debt ceiling. Think about the abuse being levelled on any leader today over the ills of our modern world. Moses is hurt beyond belief. He is mortally wounded and so he turns to HaShem to complain.

When I began to think about these situations, the commentaries speaking to the question of despair rang very true. When you think about it, the stories we are most familiar with in the Torah and indeed in the whole of the Tanach which means the Torah, the Nevi'im or Prophets, and the Ketuvim or Writings, so much of them revolve around despair. The Patriarchs each in their own way illustrate situations that led to profound feelings of despair. When Judah told Joseph, who he still did not realize was his brother that if Benjamin did not return to their father, like Joseph before him, their father would surely die. What would he die from – despair at the loss of his beloved son. WE know that King

Saul became totally disengaged from reality over his inadequacies and his presumed defeat at the hands of his enemies. The best example is King David who often despaired. He wrote....

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

[Ps. 22:2](#)

“From the depths I cry to You.”

[Ps. 130:1](#)

“I am a helpless man abandoned among the dead ... You have laid me in the lowest pit, in the dark, in the depths.”

[Ps. 88:5-7](#)

Despair is very much a part of the human condition. Moses despaired because he believed that HaShem expected him to be the guardian of the people. The word for Guardian in Hebrew is Oman and it comes from a word whose root means firm, steady or reliable. In Hebrew, that word leads to Ne'eman which means faithful, reliable, and enduring. Those are words that are used to describe any good strong leader, but we learn about leadership in this parsha from the way in which HaShem helps Moses find his way. In the end, it is faith which we need in order to find our way from despair to confidence. Leadership is never easy. We as a people are expected to be a light unto the nations. We are put in positions of leadership and our parsha shows us a way to rise to the demands in front of us. Our faith has helped us weather the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune time and time again. That is why we have endured as a people and as a faith. Shabbat Shalom.