BS”D

Parshas Beha’alosecha 5776

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*G-d values our simple offerings and our simple deeds.*

The Humble Light

In this week’s Torah portion of Beha’alos’cha, the narrative of the Book of Bamidbar continues. Among other things, the Torah tells us of the inauguration of the Levi’im, the first journey of the Israelites from Sinai, the complaints of the people about the manna, and the consequences of those complaints, and Miriam’s criticism of Moshe. But just one thing stands out as a law rather than part of the narrative: the first four verses that talk about the lighting of the Menorah. Why is that included at this point of the Torah?

The Ramban says that the Torah supplements the laws of the Menorah that were previously stated in the Books of Shmos and Vayikra. Here, at the end of the setting-up of the Mishkan, the Torah states clearly for the first time that all seven lamps be lit and that they should “shine towards the center of the Menorah.”

Rashi brings the famous Midrash that G-d was easing Aharon’s disappointment. At the end of the previous parsha, the Torah recounts the special offerings of the princes of each of the twelve tribes upon the dedication of the altar. But there was no offering by Aharon’s tribe, the tribe of Levi. G-d therefore said to Aharon, “Your offering is greater than theirs,” for you prepare and kindle the lights of the Menorah.

The Ramban asks, why is the Menorah singled out? After all, the Cohanim brought sacrifices daily; they brought incense daily as well as lighting the Menorah daily.

The Ramban suggests that the uniqueness of the Menorah is that it is lit even after the destruction of the Temple. The miracle of Chanukah came about through the Chashmonaim, Cohanim, descendants of Aharon. The lights that we kindle on Chanukah recall not only the miracle that took place in the time of the Chashmonaim, but the original Menorah of the Sanctuary as well. Thus Aharon’s offering, i.e., the Menorah of Chanukah, “is greater than theirs,” for it applies in every generation and in every place.

The Ibn Ezra gives an interesting reason for the inclusion of the laws of the Menorah here. The last sentence of the previous parsha says that Moshe would hear G-d’s Voice from the Sanctuary and he would enter and speak with Him.

Well, what if G-d called Moshe at night? If it was pitch black, he wouldn’t be able to see where he was going. So the Menorah, which was of course lit to honor G-d, also illuminated the Sanctuary so that Moshe could see.

The Ramban criticizes the Ibn Ezra because, he maintains, G-d spoke to Moshe only by day. Moshe’s prophecy differed from other prophets. To the others, G-d spoke in dreams, in visions of the night, but to Moshe, He spoke directly in the light of the day.

Abarbanel defends the Ibn Ezra. Indeed, Moshe did not prophesize through dreams. G-d spoke to Him directly. But G-d spoke to him both by day and by night. The quality of Moshe’s prophecy exceeded all other prophets, but that prophecy could come at any time, including nighttime.

Those are some of the approaches in “pshat,” the plain meaning of our text. I would like to cite several Midrashic teachings that will give a more spiritual side to the positioning of the laws of the Menorah in our parsha.

The Midrash Rabba says (16:4) that Moshe had a hard time visualizing the Menorah and G-d had to show it to him. G-d also had to show him the kosher and non-kosher animals. Also, He had to show him the moon so as to understand the laws of establishing the new moon and the lunar calendar. Why did Moshe have so much trouble with the Menorah?

Now we know that G-d does not need the light of the Menorah. Rather, He is graciously giving us an opportunity to serve Him by kindling the lights. The Midrash gives a parable (16:5):

A blind man and a sighted man were traveling together. The sighted man helped guide the blind man on the road. When they came to a house in the village, the sighted man asked the blind man to light the lamps for him. He explained, “Until now I was helping you. Now I want you to help me.”

So, too, G-d is the sighted man while the blind man represents Israel who stumbles in the darkness. G-d guides us with His light, yet He asks us to “help” him by lighting a light in His honor.

Another parable (15:8): A king told his friend that he is going to visit him and eat at his house. The man prepared a simple meal with a simple table and a simple Menorah for the king. When the king’s retinue arrived, the man saw the king’s servants holding golden Menorahs to light the king’s way. The friend was embarrassed and quickly hid all of his simple things.

When the king arrived, he asked his friend why he hadn’t prepared anything for him. The man replied that when he saw the glory of the king, he was ashamed of his paltry furnishings.

“No,” said the king. “It is not so. I reject all of my grand objects, and because of my love for you I want to use your simple things.”

So, too, with G-d and Israel. G-d is the master of incredible light. Yet he values our humble offerings. He values the Sanctuary we built and the light of the Menorah that we kindle.

Perhaps we can now understand the first Midrash I cited. Moshe could not understand how we could light a lamp for G-d. The answer is that G-d chooses to care for our outreach to Him. Like the king in the story, G-d values our simple offerings and our simple deeds.

Perhaps this also explains Moshe’s problem with the kosher and non-kosher animals, and with the new moon. Why should the A-lmighty care what we eat? Why do we create calendars and festive dates for G-d Who is beyond time and space? So G-d showed him that it does matter. G-d cherishes our dedication to Him, He cherishes our celebrations. The A-lmighty, beyond power of our imagination, the A-lmighty, the Infinite Light, cherishes our humble Menorah.

This is the connection of the laws of lighting the Menorah written after the completion of the Sanctuary. G-d tells us that He loves us and desires our light. Through serving Him, we merit, as the Midrash quotes from Yeshaya (60:13), “Arise, shine, for your light has dawned… and nations shall walk by Your light, kings by Your shining radiance.”