

## Notes for Parsha Beha'alotecha: Numbers 8:1 – 12:16

In this, the third parsha of the book we find a description of the Temple Menorah, the dedication of the Levites, the second Passover, and the entire community's journey from Sinai to Moab. We also listen to the murmurings and complaints of the people, watch the appointment of seventy elders to assist Moses in guiding the community and we hear Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses along with the consequences of their behavior.

Our narrative opens with a description of the seven-branched Temple Menorah. Only the instruction to mount the lamp are included – not the lighting instructions.

8:1-12: contains the purification ritual for the Levites and their following ordination ceremony by the community at large.

8:13-22: God designates the Levites as a wave offering to God, setting the Levites apart from the general community of Israel. This is a formal assignment for the Levites to serve Aaron and his sons. The designation of the Levites also is a replacement for the first born of Israel. This makes expiation for the community so that they won't be afflicted by a plague for coming too near to the sanctuary.

8:23 – This section is where God speaks to Moses and gives him the instructions for the Levites. They must be a minimum of 25 years old but at the age of 50 they may retire from their regular work although they may still stand guard with their brothers if they choose to do so.

Beginning with Chapter 9, the text switches themes. Still in Sinai, the text tells us that the date is the first new moon of the second year following the people's escape from Egypt. This means Passover has come once again and therefore, Moses instructs the people to offer the Passover sacrifice at its set time – at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month according to all its rites and rules. There are some men, however, who question these instructions because they were impure because of a corpse and therefore could not observe the Passover with the rest of the community. God's instructions to Moses allow for such men, or those who are out on long journeys to observe the Passover on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the second month of the year. Even strangers who are among the Israelites may offer the Passover sacrifice, assuming they follow the same rules and precepts set in place by God.

These instructions are followed by a new set from God that instructs Moses to have two silver trumpets made. Hammered works, they are to be blown to summon the community as well as to set in motion the divisions. This section includes the specifics of short blasts or long and how many in order to pass on pertinent information of the tribal leaders. As for who may blow the trumpets; that job is reserved for Aaron's sons, the priests. As we have seen in other instances, this commandment is to be set as an institution for all ages. When the trumpets are blown on joyful occasions, on the fixed festivals and new moons, then its sound will be a reminder to the people that God is the Lord.

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Bamidbar 10:11 – 11:35 is all about rebels and prophets. It is in this section that the Israelites again move forward on their journey beginning with the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the second month of the second year. The people moved forward in distinct units with flags flying, with the tribe of Judah leading the way. This time they marched a distance of three days from the mountain of the Lord. By day the people followed the cloud, by night they followed the pillar of fire.

The “asafsuf” – translated as mixed multitude or riffraff began to complain bitterly. “If only we had meat to eat. If only we’d stayed in Egypt where we had fish to eat for free, and cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled and there is nothing but this manna.” (11:5-6)

Moses goes to God and pours out his frustration with the people, asking why God has dealt ill with him that he should have to nursemaid the people who do nothing but whine for meat. Moses continues his tirade, saying that he needs help, this job is just too big for him, and if God means for him to continue alone, God should just kill him on the spot so he doesn’t have to see the people’s continued wretchedness.

Understanding Moses’ predicament, he tell Moses to gather seventy of the people elders whom Moses has experience of as well as officers of the people. God tells Moses that he will speak to Moses at this gathering and that Moses’ responsibilities will be shared among the elders and officers.

God also tells Moses to let the people know they are to be ready for tomorrow when God will provide them with meat and not just enough for one or two days but enough for a whole month until the meat comes out the people’s nostrils and becomes loathsome to them.

Moses followed God’s instructions. When the elders and officers gathered with Moses, God came down in a cloud and spoke to Moses who drew upon God’s spirit that was on him and placed it onto the elders. When God’s spirit rested on the elders, they spoke in ecstasy. (Side note: Today this is considered speaking in tongues.)

Next we see a wind start up and sweep quail in from the sea, strewing the fowl across the camp plus across a space that was an entire day’s journey in both directions from the camp. The depth of the quail was about two cubits deep on the land. The people began to gather the quail and just as they put the fowl into their mouths to begin to chew, God struck them with a plague.

The final section of this parsha contains the story of Miriam and Aaron speaking out against Moses because of the Cushite woman, Zipporah, Moses’ wife. Miriam and Aaron appear to be jealous of the relationship between God and Moses, and God overhears their conversation. God comes down in his cloud and calls Miriam and Aaron to him, chastising them for their behavior and jealousy. When God, still incensed leaves, Miriam is struck with snow white scales covering her skin. Aaron does not receive any punishment for this incident.

The parsha ends with Moses pleading with God to heal Miriam using the words we recite today – O God, pray heal her. – אל נא רפא נא לא El nah r’fanah nah la.

Miriam spends seven days outside the camp and when she is healed, she is allowed to return to the camp.

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