Beha'aloth’cha

Lets start by going back to Shemot (40:17) where we read that ‘on the first day of the first month of the 2nd year after leaving Egypt’, the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was erected, by Moses, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. It was a hugely significant day whose events are told and retold in three of the five books of the Torah. I mentioned Shemot already. We read about this day again in Vayikra when Moses first tells the people that Aaron will be the high priest, and anoints him (8:11). And last week in Naso when the offerings of the tribal princes begun on that same day, and again this week in Beha'aloth’cha (Bamidbar 9) we are again at the start of the first month of the 2nd year, as Moses instructs the people to observe the first seder, on the first anniversary after leaving Egypt.

In Talmud Shabbat 87b, which Daf Yomi afficionados read a week ago, Rav Havivi from Hozena’a says that the first day of the first month of the 2nd year has 10 crowns: it was the first day of creation (i.e it was a Sunday) , the first day of the offerings brought by the princes (which we read about in Naso last week), the first day of the priesthood, the first day of service in the mishkan, the first day fire descended on the altar, the first day that the peace offering was brought by the people, the 1st day the Shechinah dwelt in the midst of the people, the 1st day the people were blessed by the priests, , the 1st day of a prohibition about improvised altars. And the 1st of the months, Nisan.

The first day of the first month of the 2nd year is a day on which Jewish history pivots. For 10 months the people have been at the foot of Mount Sinai. They received a revelation from the top of the mountain, but they stumbled off the chosed path by creating the golden calf and suffered a plague, and incurred God and Moses’ wrath - then waited months while the Mishkan was built for them, by Bezalel and Aholiav - all the time fed by manna. But as Rabbi Havivi noted, on this first day of the first month of the 2nd year everything changes, and everything starts for real. The Mishkan is dedicated, as are the Priests, and organised, ritualised religious worship starts. A new hierarchy is in put into effect with Aaron and the Cohanim at the top and levi’im below, and isralites even further beneath. And after 10 months of stasis, the people are going to move on to the promised land; Moses instructs the people in Chapter 10 how this is going to happen – where to physically align around the Mishkan, and in what order to march onwards, when to march and where to march to.

The Torah acknowledges the risks involved in such a transition, such a pivotal moment, in moving from somewhere which had been a secure home for nearly a year, to the unknown. The risks are apparent for the leaders as well as the people.

Moses talks with his father in law, Jethro –and asks him to be the guide on their ongoing journey through the wilderness. . In this weeks parshah his faher in law is called Hovav, There is a dispute as to whether Hovav is Jethro or Jethro’s son, with Rashi supporting his identity with Jethro. Jethro had been such a support in the past, and Moses is very disappointed that he wants to return to Midian. He offers him inducements but to no avail. the Torah never says he left but implies his role has been replaced by God providing the instructions on where to travel And within a few days of his leaving, the problem that Jethro helped Moses sort out a year earlier resurfaces, as Moses complains to God in 11:14 “I (Moses) cannot carry all this people by myself for it is too much for me”. God has to propose a rehash of Jethro’s advice on delegation, to appoint 70 elders to share the burden. Moses also has to deal with ‘unauthorised briefings’ from Miriam and Aaron criticising him under the guise of attacks on his personal life (12:1). Fake news? Hear more about that on Sunday with Robert. But its relevant today that one of the criticisms of Moses if of him having married a Cushite – a black woman - but whether midainite women actually were Cushim, or was this a slur, this was lealry a way of attacking Moses for Political reasons?

Moses is finding these first few weeks of the 2nd year after leaving Egypt very difficult.

God and Moses endeavoured to organise the transition carefully and developed new symbols and rituals to support this. Lighting the Menorah at the start of the sedrah symbolises the future – 8:3 states that the light was only ‘in front’ of the Menorah – behind is darkness but our future is bright. New silver trumpets were cast – these would be blown to announce when the camp would move, the first blast for the tribes on the east to start moving, the 2nd blast for the tribes on the west. And incidentally with a nod to Liz and Meira, the blasts were also to announce each Tappuz meeting when Moses and the congregation would get together at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And after the blast announcing when to start moving, God’s cloud over the camp would lead them in the right direction.

As well as symbols and guidance, there was also a new ritual. That first Pesach that the people were commanded to observe in the 1st Nisan after leaving Egypt must have been so poignant as the Bnei Yisrael remembered their slavery under Pharaoh and their miraculous deliverance. This ritual should have created a basis for a communal determination to make the next phase of their journey a success, It seemed that there was a clear strategy with new guidance and new rituals to make the new journey a success, but yet only a month later the anxiety about transition and the fear of the unknown lead to murmers and complaints, not harking back to the time in Sinai, but to Egypt! If Pesach was intended to be a help and a positive experience for the people about to re-start their journey away from Egypt, towards Canaan, it seemed to backfire. And as we’ll read next week, it basically gets worse and worse

While the example of top-down leadership described in the Torah may not be our preferred model today, the many stories in this fascinating sedrah attest to the dangers of times of transition, the need for effective leadership, and the difficulty in keeping the people focussed on the task ahead.

Exodus 40 P