

Shabbat Shalom. Or, as the kids say in the New Yiddish, “wassup, yo?”

Every music anthology has its well-known standards and its lesser-known album tracks. The same is true of the five-volume set that we call the Torah. This week's Torah reading gives us a rare treat. Not one, but two of the Torah's all-time greatest hits – so popular that they're traditionally heard at least four times every week of the year, plus holidays.

Those of you awake for the sixth Aliyah might have recognized the words in its first verse. וַיְהִי בִּנְסֻעַ הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה | יְהוָה וַיִּפְּצוּ אֵיכָבֶד וַיִּגְסוּ מִשְׁנָאִיךָ מִפְּנֶיךָ. For five points and control of the tune we use for Adon Olam today, who can say where that's from?

Correct, it's the first thing we sing when we open the ark in the Torah Service. It means, “And when the ark started to travel, Moses said ‘arise, Big-G, and scatter your enemies, and those who hate You flee from you.’”

Why do we sing *that* when we first open the ark in the Torah Service? What are we *about to do* when we open the ark in the Torah Service? Take out the Torah and chant from it. The biblical ark contained the word of Big-G, and when we open *our* ark those words are about to travel out of it on a carefully inscribed scroll. Those words, Big-G's influence, will קוּמָה will *rise above us* – especially if the Torah reader is really loud. As for the significance of “scatter your enemies and those who hate you fleeing” – let's just say it's not a good look if you pick that moment in the service to head to the restroom.

Interestingly enough, the very next verse in the Torah reading is one you'll hear (part of) in a few minutes. וּבִגְלוֹתָ יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יְהוָה רַבְבוֹת אֱלֹפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. For another five points and first dibs at seconds at today's kiddush, who can say where that's from?

Correct, it's the beginning of the *final* thing we sing, at the end of the Torah Service. It's the opening sentence of the paragraph that ends with Etz Chayim Hi. It means, “And in it resting, he said, ‘rest, Big-G, amid the multitudes and thousands of Israel.’”

Why do we sing that when we've returned the Torah to the ark at the end of the Torah Service? The Torah just got a workout. Did a lap around the sanctuary, was opened and closed eight times, was lifted higher than a cheerleader dare go, another lap around the

room... for some of us that'd be a full day. Not to mention, the legitimate notion that we've received Big-G's words and it's time for them to rest, to settle in among us after we've heard them.

So, with those classic lines in mind, straight from the Torah and bookending the chanting from the Torah, let's revisit a few other interesting tidbits in the Torah reading we just heard.

A lot happens in this week's parshah, BeHa'alotcha. In the beginning... I mean in the beginning of the parshah. "In the beginning" was over three books ago. In this week's exciting episode, the first thing that happens is Aaron lights the golden Menorah in the Mishkan – the tabernacle – and then Moses initiates the Levites into their service of the tabernacle. To prepare for this, the Levites get a shave and a shower, and it just wouldn't be the Torah if there weren't a few sacrifices offered.

We're partway into Bemidbar, the book of Numbers, which is book number four of the Torah. But we're still just one year removed from the exodus from Egypt. So, on this second year of Passover, the Second Passover is introduced – Pesach Sheini which is a chance one month later for anyone who failed to observe Passover as scheduled because they didn't set their alarm clocks.

Moses was bestowed with two large silver trumpets, which might be the real reason why his father-in-law Yitro was reluctant to join their journey. Such a racket. They were sounded on various occasions including when the Israelites were to travel or battle – one if by desert, two if by the Dead Sea.

Speaking of travel, ever since the Mishkan was built, it was covered by a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud lifted, the Israelites were to travel. When the cloud settled in somewhere, so did the Israelites. This also provided the Israelites with additional skin protection because when they traveled through the desert it was always cloudy.

Now, a year after the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, it was time to depart. We hear many details about the Israelites' exact formation as they would parade through the desert. However, early in the journey, the Israelites started to protest. Mainly they complained about the provisions – they were sick of the manna from heaven and wanted meat. There was no Buc-ee's nearby to stop at, so Big-G caused a lot of quail to descend on them. The subset of the populace who went back for seconds died in a plague.

By the way, the Hebrew word for “the manna” is “haman.” I'm glad we're far enough from Purim that nobody was shouting or booing during the sixth Aliyah.

Moses complained to Big-G that he can't handle leadership anymore. And Big-G said “let there be middle management,” and so Moses appointed seventy elders to whom he could delegate certain leadership responsibilities.

Near the end, Miriam said some unkind things about her brother Moses, which resulted in her contracting leprosy. There was no urgent care nearby, so Moses pleaded for her to recover, and it thus lasted only one week.

Like I said, a lot happens in this parshah. And I even left out a few bits. Most people around the world talking about this parshah today are no doubt talking about leadership, complaining, or other things that might in some way resonate with particularly current events. So, naturally – and to avoid the risk of defenestration – I won't.

It'd be easy to talk about whether Moses was right, or the Israelites were wrong, or Big-G was vengeful. But as my students here over the last sixteen years would attest, I'm not easy. So, let's consider for a moment not who was right or who was wrong. Rather let's consider how these kinds of issues can be avoided in the first place. After all, avoid what causes such issues and there's no response about which to worry who was right or wrong.

And here's a thought about simplifying things into “right and wrong.” Late in the biblical epic *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin says “you're either with me or you're my enemy.” In response to that unfortunate piece of screenwriting, Obi-Wan Kenobi says, “only a Sith deals in absolutes.” But... *what he just said* is an absolute! Obi-Wan was a Sith all along!

The point being that binary polarizations are problematic. They over-simplify things to make them easier to comprehend but lack the nuances prevalent throughout reality. By lacking nuance in favor of simplicity, binary extremes introduce inaccuracy. Inaccuracy in context or communication are fundamental ingredients to... misunderstanding. And from misunderstanding comes conflict.

My day job is a career in technical communication – even though for many years now I've been in upper management as opposed to actually working for a living. Congregation Sinai is the latest stop in my secondary career in primary education. I also do a lot of theatre, as an actor, writer, director, and all-purpose malcontent. Each of these, in its own way, is about context and communication with an audience. I mention all that just to give you context, that I've seen how context and communication are essential factors in a broad realm of human interaction.

As nearly a couple of you know, I've been gradually translating the Torah commentary of the early eighteenth-century Venetian rabbi Moshe Chafetz. Here are a couple of items from his commentary on this week's parshah, both of which touch on human interaction and communication.

As I mentioned, early into the journey away from Mount Sinai, the Israelites started complaining. At first, it was about how the journey was difficult, but then it turned into protesting about the food. They said, “we remember the fish” (11:5) and so on that they had in Egypt, and they wanted to go back to having that instead of their steady diet of manna from heaven.

R. Chafetz points out that “A person's soul marvels at what's *visible*. And then one's inner senses will take the image of what's visible from the outside, until it's drawn into the mind and remembering it is a wonder to him. And he'll inscribe that thing like a book in his memory, as if it's always an image before his eyes, in a dream in a night vision in light sleep upon a bed.”

He continues, “because the Israelites in Egypt always ate fish and vegetables it overwhelmed their senses so they'd always remember them. So, they said ‘we remember

the fish the cucumbers (and so on)' as if to say, 'in the past we remember that each and every day included the fish and the herbs.'

"Today's provisions, instead, they don't remember any of it and it doesn't act in their senses. Rather their souls are dry to the imagination of the dry things that are visible, because now they always see the manna, never the herbs that sow seed. Instead, just a plain thing that works best in the sense of sight, and the same color is always with them whether in a mill or in dust in houses in yards and in fields, because when "the dew fell on the camp" in the middle of the night and in darkness "the manna fell on it" in a manner that *no moment* remains to see God's kindness – from harvest of the sun and harvest of the land and its fullness as the garden of God, like in the land of Egypt:"

In other words – to translate the translation – the Israelites were used to fish and vegetables in Egypt, and now all they have is manna which is a plain uninteresting thing that blends in with the desert. And they don't see it come to them in the dark of night, so they don't see God's kindness as they did with things growing "as the garden of God." But their souls remember what they used to have and it lingers in their dreams, in their subconscious, which helped them take manna for granted, and drove them to miss the old food and to complain.

If they'd simply said something instead, perhaps the nature of the manna could have been changed. Perhaps they could have considered how they missed the food but maybe that it wasn't too high a price to pay for no longer being slaves. They first complained about the arduous journey, in their first time traveling in the desert in a year – so perhaps they could have considered that new effort might be making them crankier.

That was about the people en masse. The parshah also gives an example that's at more of an individual level. Near the end of the parshah, Miriam says, "has God spoken only through Moses? Has He not also spoken through us? And God heard." (12:2)

R. Chafetz wonders why it says "and God heard" since it's obvious. Therefore, there must be a reason for stating this *beyond* the obvious. R. Chafetz points out that "Moses was 'slow of speech and slow of tongue' and his words weren't heard until Aaron was

forced to speak and advise in Egypt. They assert that Moses shouldn't be arrogant and consider himself superior to them about his speaking with God, because he didn't know how to make his voice heard if they didn't interpret his words." So, when Miriam said, "has He not spoken through us as well," God heard it and interpreted it as mockery, and that's why she was punished.

Perhaps Moses could have shown more appreciation for Aaron and Miriam along the way. Perhaps Miriam could've simply told Moses how she felt about this instead of saying it behind his back. As I always tell my actors, my staff, my students, my eventual exes... if you don't tell me there's an issue, I won't know to do anything about it. If they'd simply communicated a bit more openly, this sentiment of lack of appreciation or recognition might not have festered in Miriam. Then there would've been no incident about which to ask the questions that many rabbis pose: whether Big-G was unreasonable in punishing Miriam, or whether some intercession would have been called for.

As some of you know, in my copious spare time I used to run a local Shakespeare company for six years. I don't like *Romeo and Juliet*. It always struck me as an iambic *Three's Company* episode – you know, like that episode where there's a misunderstanding. If they'd simply communicated better, they'd still be alive.

What's the context for what's going on? What's it like in the other person's sandals? Is there a better way to interact, one that will produce a better outcome even if it takes more effort? Isn't it worth trying to avoid an issue before it becomes one, rather than have to figure out how to fix it after the fact, when factors such as time and emotion can complicate it?

And isn't it as much about listening actively – listening to comprehend rather than listening to formulate response – and not just about speaking? If a word falls in the forest and nobody listens to what it really means, did it make a difference?

In the case of the Israelites, whether they knew it or not, they had thirty-nine more years to go. With every additional bit of forethought and openness, so might we. Shabbat shalom.

D'var Torah for BeHa'alotcha – Context and Communication  
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