

## *B'Haaloscho*

### *Instability, Eternal Values, and Peace*

**T**he world today is in flux. Great changes have taken place before our very eyes during the past few years. Not only have empires fallen, but some of our most cherished concepts like family, humility, modesty, etc. have been directly challenged. We Jewish people have been in the vortex of all these rapid changes. We have been accused both of fomenting them and of preventing them. All the ills of the world have been blamed on us and on our *Torah* on one hand and, on the other hand, we have been accused of having forsaken our own moral and religious teachings. In these times of great change, all our Jewish values are being tested and shaken.

We all know that in life we are usually never called upon to make a choice between good and evil. We are almost always called upon to choose between two goods, between two principles which are both good. In life, it happens many times that two wonderful ethical principles conflict. What are we to do when that happens? For example, the principles of preserving life and compassion can directly conflict when a mother is called upon to take her infant child to get shots against diphtheria, whooping cough, etc. She knows that when the baby is going to be given a shot, he is going to scream and yell. It is going to be a very traumatic experience. Compassion would dictate that we forego giving the baby shots. On the other hand, failure to give the baby his shots may endanger his life. Judaism in this instance comes down firmly on the side of giving the baby shots. There is no question that in this instance when a baby's life is potentially in danger, you must give him shots. On the other hand, if a person is dying and it is possible that if you will subject him to a very painful and difficult medical procedure, he might live a few more hours, should you submit him to this procedure to prolong his life, or should you listen to the principle of compassion and forego these difficult and painful procedures? In this instance, according to most Jewish authorities, Judaism would come down on the side of compassion and not have us do these difficult and painful procedures which would only prolong the person's life a few more hours. In these times of great economic, medical, and scientific advances which no one thought possible in the past, many people have lost their moral an-

chors. They do not know which way to turn.

In the *Torah* portion *B'Haaloscha* we learn about a similar period in Jewish history. We learn how, after the Jewish people had left Egypt and had received the *Torah* and were making their way to the land of Israel, they were confronted with a whole new series of experiences and possibilities. The circumstances of their lives had changed dramatically. They no longer could look to Egyptian culture to guide them in cultural matters. They had received the *Torah* at Mount Sinai but they still did not know how to integrate its values into their lives. They were on the march, and they were chafing at the restraints that the *Torah* had placed upon them, especially the sexual restraints, the rabbis comment.

At the very beginning of this *Torah* portion we learn how Aaron was designated to prepare the *menorah* every morning so that the *menorah*, the symbol of the eternal truths of Judaism, could be properly lit. Aaron was a *Rodef Shalom* and an *Ohev Shalom*. He was a pursuer of peace and a lover of peace. He was called upon to reconcile two conflicting values. He was called upon to light the *menorah*, to uphold the values of Judaism, its eternal truths, and at the same time, always to deal peacefully and agreeably with the many among the Jewish people who were not in favor of upholding the *Torah* values that they had been given at Sinai. He was called upon to uphold peace and to uphold the values of the *Torah* simultaneously. This was a difficult proposition.

Similarly, we learn in this *Torah* portion how Moshe pleads with his father-in-law not to leave the Jewish people. He tells him that because of his great knowledge of the desert, he would be their eyes. He would show them where to camp and how to go. This indeed seems strange because we had learned just a few paragraphs before how the Jewish people would know when to break camp, when to march, and when to stop. They would know when it was time to move when the cloud upon the Tabernacle would rise. When the cloud would rise, they would begin to travel and when it would rest, they would stop. It would seem then that the Jewish people were to be guided by the cloud in their journey through the desert. Why did Moshe tell his father-in-law that he would be their eyes in the desert? The answer, the rabbis tell us, is that it is true that the cloud would tell the people when they were to move, but it would not tell them how to move. It

indicated that times were changing, that the Jewish people could not sit still anymore. Egypt had been shattered. New empires were arising. New technologies were coming to the fore. The Jewish people had to prepare for their new home. The Jewish people would have to move. They could not maintain themselves the way they had for hundreds of years, but how were they to go? What directions should they take? Yisro could teach the people how they were to move. According to our tradition, Yisro was acquainted with all the philosophies and religions of his day. The rabbis tell us that he had tried all of them before he became a Jew, and he had found them all wanting. He would be able to tell the Jewish people what pitfalls to avoid, what philosophies to shun. He could tell them how to maneuver through this time of great instability.

In this *Torah* portion also we have the famous verses which we sing every time we take out the *Torah*. "And it was when the Ark travelled Moshe said, 'Get up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered and let those that hate You flee from before You', and when the Ark rested Moshe said, 'Return, G-d, unto the ten thousands of the families of Israel'." When the Ark is moving, when there is great instability in the world, we Jewish people are very, very vulnerable. We are very vulnerable because all our values are under attack. We need G-d's help to protect us from our enemies because the Ark is no longer in the center of the Jewish camp but at the head of the Jewish camp. The *Torah* tells us that when the cloud rises, it moves to the front of the Jewish people with the Ark directly beneath it. No longer is the *Torah* and its study the center of the Jewish people. The *Torah* is ahead of the Jewish people. There are too many other problems for the Jewish people to contend with, like fleeing persecution, making a living, etc. for them to be exclusively concerned with the *Torah*. During the last hundred years we have seen how Jewish life has been destabilized. The whole world has undergone a transformation. There are not longer kings, peasants, the familiar way of life which had lasted for a thousand years. One hundred years ago the ground began to burn under our feet. We knew that we had to leave the *shtetels*. Those rabbis and leaders who counseled them to stay put and follow the ways we had always followed abetted the tragedies that awaited our people. Communism destroyed us spiritually and Naziism destroyed us physically. The rabbis in Europe who told

their people, "Do not go to America; it is a *treif* land," or "Do not go to Israel; it is too hard" were not entirely wrong. There were and are problems in America, and there were difficulties in Israel, but the cloud had risen. History proved that it was much worse for us to stay where we were than to go. How do we follow the cloud when it moves, when society is no longer stable? We need the help of people like Yisro, people who understand what the world is all about and still choose to be Jews. We need leaders who both pursue peace but, at the same time, uphold the values of Judaism.

We hope that we are now entering an era in which the cloud will rest, in which there will be stability in the world. We hope that we are entering into an era in which the world will be able to adjust to new technologies and new ways without destroying moral values and engaging in terrible wars. When stability returns to the world and the cloud rests, it is our hope and prayer that the Jewish people in their multitudes will return to G-d as it says, "When the Ark rested, he said, 'Return, G-d, unto the ten thousands of the families of Israel'." It is the job of the leadership of the Jewish people to remain true to the eternal truths of Judaism and, at the same time, to maintain peace so that the multitudes can return to our Jewish way of life.

In our day we have so many Jews who are so far from Judaism. We hope that they will return because we have not lost contact with them because we have created a path for them to return by always maintaining open communication with them. Aaron stood for both Jewish values and for peace. He maintained open lines of communication and a deep love for every Jew no matter what his ideas, even thou Aaron, himself, staunchly defended *Torah* values. Aaron lit the *menorah*. He stood for Jewish values, but he also was a valiant fighter for peace. He even participated in the sin of the golden calf with the people, the rabbis say, trying to delay as much as possible their building the calf so that the excesses of that sin could be mitigated so that the people could still return. He, though, always stood as a beacon of *Torah* values; otherwise, the people would have nothing to return to. His was indeed a very difficult balancing act.

In our day, the cloud is still moving. Conditions in the world are still changing dramatically, but the eternal truths of the *Torah* are still the eter-

nal truths, no matter how they are challenged. The values of family, humility, modesty, learning, etc. will always be central to the Jewish people and will be the point to which the multitudes of the Jewish people will have to return. Let us, however, remember that we need all Jews, even Jews who are far from our people. We must always pursue peace and maintain open communications while, at the same time, upholding our Jewish values, not only for the sake of our people but for the sake of the world. If we will do this, we can rest assured that when the cloud stops, the Jewish people will once again return to the values of the *Torah*, and the *Torah* once again will be in the center of the camp, and the Jewish people will become a light to all the peoples.