



**Torah Reflections on *Parashat Beha'aloteha*  
Numbers 8: 1 – 12:16**

11 Sivan 5768

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One of my favorite Hasidic stories is a tale about a young boy who attended Yom Kippur services one year with his father. Having grown up far from town on a farm, the boy was illiterate in the words of the *siddur* (prayerbook) and Torah. Although he could not understand the words of prayer being chanted in the synagogue, the boy was deeply moved by the experience and wanted to lend his own expressions of faith. In his pocket, the boy carried a whistle that he had lovingly carved himself. He frequently played it at home to soothe the farm animals when they became anxious or restless. Throughout that day in *shul*, the boy fingered the whistle in his pocket, wishing to pull it out and offer his own song to God. Yet his father, sensing his son's desire, always took hold of his hand, insisting that the whistle remain in the boy's pocket. Finally, during the *Neilah* service that marked the culmination of the holiday, the boy could resist no longer. During a silent moment of meditation, he whipped out his whistle and blew a glorious note. The room was hushed as the boy's father looked at him in annoyance and shame, rushing him towards the door to leave. Just then, the rabbi's voice called out: God had opened the gates! The prayers of the entire congregation had ascended to heaven on the pure note of the boy's whistle. The members of the *shul*, with all their learned prayer, could not prevail upon God as the young boy was able to by his simple desire to communicate through his heart with God.

In my work, I often meet people who are afraid that they need to know "the right words" to offer in prayer. They turn to me asking for the words from our tradition that are correct for this or that occasion. Yet as both this Hasidic tale, and this week's Torah portion, *Beha'aloteha*, teach us, the words of our hearts carry a powerful force.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of Moses' sister Miriam being stricken with leprosy. Although the "sin" that caused her illness was related to speaking out against her brother Moses, it is Moses who offers one of the most impassioned and certainly the shortest prayer in the Torah. "*El na refa na la: Please God, please heal her*" (Numbers 12:13).

It is suggested by some rabbinic sources that the prayer's brevity reflects Moses' reluctance to show favoritism towards a member of his own family in his prayers. Others imply that Moses was ambivalent towards Miriam because of her misdeed.

Yet it has always appeared clear to me that Moses' prayer was one of deeply felt emotion. For one thing, we are told that Moses cried out (*va-yitzak*) his prayer to God. As Ellen Frankel notes in *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary On The Torah* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996, pg. 213), "For when those we love are stricken suddenly, the most we can sometimes do is cry out. And sometimes even that cry is wordless."

When Moses cried out to God, it may very well have triggered healing; both between Moses and Miriam, and between Miriam and God. Indeed, emotional and spiritual healing occurs when we connect with each other in these most elemental and cathartic ways.

Our tradition has always recognized the interplay between *keva*, the “fixed” or structured aspects of prayer, and *kavanah*, the intention that we bring with us to prayer. As we complete our recitation of the *Amidah* prayer, we intone the words “*Yi-h’yu l’ra-tzon im-rei fi v’heg-yon li-bi l’fa-neh-ha, Adonai tzu-ri v’go-a-li*: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

Sometimes it is the soulful shout, the short but impassioned prayer that leads most directly to the ears of God. At our times of deepest need it is important to remember that the impulsive cries from our heart, the spontaneous words that leap from our mouth may carry the most meaning and offer the most comfort, both for us and those we love.

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*This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Janet Offel of Temple Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills, California. It is brought to you by Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.*

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