

Parashah One Hundred and Five
Numbers 8:1–9:23; Zechariah 4:2–14; Romans 8:14

notes by Tim Hegg

The Menorah, Levites, and Pesach

In the previous *parashah* the dedication of the altar had taken place with each tribe bringing its offering of dedication. Now we read of the dedication/lighting of the menorah, the setting apart of the Levites for the service of the Tabernacle, and the first memorial celebration of the Pesach by the nation of Israel after that first Pesach in which they actually left the land of their slavery.

Looking ahead in the book of **בְּמִדְבָּר** (*beMidbar*, Numbers) we find that the Silver Trumpets are constructed and consecrated (10:1ff) but no other articles of the Tabernacle are given specific mention as objects of a dedication ceremony. This presents an obvious question: why only the altar, the menorah, and the silver trumpets? Why are the other articles of furniture (altar of incense, table of bread, the ark, etc.) not given specific mention?

It seems very possible to me that these objects are emphasized over the others because of their central importance to the overall symbolism and central role of sacrifice within the Tabernacle. The Altar of Sacrifice is the first item encountered when one would enter the Tabernacle. The elaborate and extensive ceremony for its dedication (last Shabbat's *parashah*) sets it apart from all the other sacred articles within the Tabernacle. It therefore takes on a prominent position as the place where the sacrifice is offered to God, and gives the whole sacrificial ritual its prominence within the priestly duties. Furthermore, the priests themselves are sanctified through the sacrifices offered there on their behalf, and thus the altar itself gave to the priesthood the necessary *sanctum* to perform their duties.

Even as the Altar of Sacrifice gave sacrifice itself a priority within the Tabernacle, and prepared the priests for their duties, opening the way for all of Israel to worship, so the menorah provided the light in the Holy Place without which ministry there would have been impossible. When the priests entered the Holy Place, it symbolized communion with God. The Bread of His Presence is so called because it symbolized the covenant meal continually eaten by Israel and her God. The Altar of Incense symbolized the continual access (through the intercession of the priests) to God enjoyed by Israel. Thus, while the Altar of Sacrifice symbolized the need for Israel to obtain atonement, the Tabernacle itself existed to portray the communion between God and man which this cleansing atonement made possible. The light of HaShem's face, referred to just previously in the Aaronic Benediction, is thus symbolized by the menorah, the only source of light in the *Mishkan* itself. Thus, the Altar is there so that the worshipper, represented by the Levite, might see the light of the very dwelling of HaShem, that is, that they might commune with Him. Atonement is not the end in itself, but a means to communion with God.

And of course, the mention of the silver trumpets in chapter 10 shows that they too had a priority in that by their sound the people were called to the *Mishkan* to worship. Thus, each of these objects which are mentioned in this passage of *B'midbar* stand as the first "doorways" into the Tabernacle—the objects that reveal the very purpose of the *Mishkan* itself, namely, communion between God and His people.

The Messianic parallels are obvious: the Altar foreshadows the death of Yeshua as our sacrifice, and the Menorah is a type of the revelation of HaShem which, according to Paul, "shines in the face of Yeshua HaMashiach" (2Cor 4:6). We of course remember the words of Yeshua Himself

when He said, “I am the light of the world.” (Jn 8:12, cf. 12:46). The Silver Trumpets that called the people to worship may well represent the call of HaShem to each of His children to communion with Him. Surely this is the goal of the Ruach to invite us into the very presence of HaShem (cf. the term “fellowship of the Spirit,” 2Co 13:14 as it must apply both to fellowship among God’s people as well as with Him).

The Menorah itself is described and its laws outlined at the beginning of the *parashah* (8:1-4, cf. Ex 25:31-40; 37:17-24; 40:24-25; Lev 24:1-3). The Menorah was of gold, hammered out of one piece, with sockets in which were set bowls of oil with wicks. Our *parashah* emphasizes particularly the mounting of the bowls or lights (נְרִיֹת, *neirot*) so that they would shed their light in front of the Menorah. Since the Menorah stood on the south side of the Holy place, its light needed to be cast northward to illuminate the Altar of Incense and the Table of the Bread of the Presence (literally לֶחֶם פָּנִים, *lechem panim*, “bread of [the] face”) in order for the priests to fulfil their duties. Its gold no doubt bespeaks purity and high value, and the fact that it was made of one piece meant that there were no joints vulnerable to breaking. There were three branches on one side, and three on the other. On each branch were four blossoms like almond blossoms, the last one being on the top of the branch and holding the bowl of oil with the wick. Thus, there were six bowls, three on each side, and a seventh in the middle. The six branches most likely represent two tribes each like the six carts of Num 7:3 where the text says explicitly that there was one cart for two tribal leaders (thus the six carts represented a gift from all twelve tribes) with two oxen for each cart (thus 12 oxen, one for each tribe). Moreover, the Menorah was fashioned to appear symbolically as a living tree—with blossoms bespeaking life. The light that illuminated the Holy place was the light of the “tree of life,” fuelled by the oil which the people brought—oil purified and set apart for this specific use. It was the “tree of life” in which the people participated, unlike Adam and Chavah who were expelled from the garden in order that they would not eat of the tree of life. Here, in the picture of redemption and the restoration of man to God, the tree of life appears again as central in the friendship between God and His people. That the oil may represent the work of the Ruach seems very possible since the metaphor of oil, used for anointing, may be connected with the Ruach by the use of “pouring out” (cf. Prov 1:23; Is 44:3; Joel 2:28; Zech 12:10, and also Ps 133:1f).

The dedication of the Levites following immediately is connected to the overall theme of the narrative by the obvious fact that the Levites were the ones through whom Israel would communion with HaShem in the *Mishkan*. Israel communed with her God via appointed representatives. Apart from them as mediators for the nation, the whole Tabernacle ritual was without value. Once again our Torah text emphasizes the central place of sacrifice (in the dedication of the altar) and the necessary and vital role of the priest as mediator.

The first step in the dedication of the Levites was their own purification. The point is made that coming into the presence of God requires purification—He simply cannot and therefore will not dwell in the presence of sin. Symbolically, then, the Levite who would be acting as mediator between the Israelite and HaShem, must himself be reckoned as absolutely pure or clean. This symbolism was carried out via washings and the shaving of the body (like the Nazirite), and the offering of sacrifices on their behalf. Only after the Levites were clean could they minister before HaShem.

In connection with this, we should be reminded of the point the writer makes to the Messianic Jews (Hebrews) in 9:11ff, that Yeshua had no need of a sacrifice for His own cleansing since He could offer Himself without blemish to God. That Yeshua was without sin is everywhere affirmed

by the Apostolic Scriptures, and is foundational for His right to be the promised Messiah. This likewise speaks of His divine nature.

Note how clearly our text emphasizes the mediatorial function of the Levites. The sons of Israel were commanded to “lay their hands upon the Levites” (v. 10, וְסָמְכוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־הַלְוִיִּם אֶת־יְדֵיהֶם). This *s'michah* (the same term used for Rabbinic ordination) was to symbolize that the Levites would represent the children of Israel as they ministered before the Lord. In like fashion, the Levites were to lay their hands upon the heads of the animals to be sacrificed (v. 12), transferring, as it were, the sins of the people which had been placed upon them to the sacrificial animals. This absolute need for representation within the scope of redemption is a constant and obvious element in the Torah and throughout the Tanach. In this way the sacrificial system always pointed to the ultimate mediatorial work of the Messiah, upon whom our sins were laid, and who alone is able to take away sins by His infinite sacrifice and eternal priestly work. His sacrifice and intercession cannot be viewed as something general, but like the priests who foreshadowed Him, must be specific to the people He represented.

The exchange of the first-born for the Levites (Num 8:14ff) is yet another clear revelation of how much HaShem desires to commune with His people. He willingly sets into place the priesthood, and at His expense, for He has ordained that only through the mediatorial work of the priest would the sinner be made clean and thus able to come into communion with Him. He exchanges the first born (which belong to Him) for the priests who would effect the propitiation between Himself and man. Here we find a most interesting fact: the Levites, who would function as priests to HaShem, were given in exchange for the firstborn of Israel. In clear symbolic fashion, the priests are themselves given on behalf of the people. God accepts the Levites in exchange for the firstborn son. Once again, this foreshadows the time when God's own Son Yeshua, acting as the Mediator of the covenant, would give Himself on behalf of His people.

The inclusion in the narrative at this point of the celebration of Pesach by the Israelites is very meaningful, for the exodus from Egypt stands as the illustration, *par excellence*, of redemption from slavery to freedom. The whole point of the exodus was so that Israel could serve HaShem in order that He might dwell in her midst. Thus, the Tabernacle, the Levites—all of it has this as its goal: communion or friendship with the Creator. The God of Israel is different than all other gods represented in the Ancient Near East in many respects, but especially in this, that He desires to dwell among His people.

The celebration of Pesach begins at twilight (בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם) on the 14th of the first month (Nisan), 9:3. The evening, in the Tanach, is the end of one day and the beginning of the next. Thus, the evening of the 14th is at the end of the day and the beginning of the 15th. The idea that בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם might be understood as the beginning of the 14th (i.e., the end of the 13th) finds no basis in the text itself, nor in the consistent practice of ancient Israel by all extant data. Thus, those who attempt to reckon the passion chronologies of the Gospels by saying that Yeshua and His disciples celebrated the Pesach at the end of the 13th do so without biblical or historical warrant.

The narrative of our text tells of some who, having become unclean through corpse defilement, were not able to bring their Pesach offering at the appointed time. In approaching Moses with their dilemma, Moses admits that he does not have the answer, but that he would approach HaShem for the specific *halalchah*. When he does inquire of the LORD, he is given the divine solution: those who are unclean at the appointed time may celebrate it one month later, on the evening of the 14th, but must do so in accordance with the prescribed statutes for Pesach, i.e., with unleavened bread,

and bitter herbs, and observing the commandments regarding the Pesach sacrifice (nothing of it may be left over until the morning, nor may any of its bones be broken). Moreover, HaShem adds an additional mercy toward those unable to observe the Pesach in its appointed time: the second Pesach may also be celebrated by those who are on a distance journey (בְּדֶרֶךְ רְחֵקָה), and are unable to appear at the Tabernacle in the appointed time. This ruling, however, is obviously open to interpretation: what constitutes a “distant journey?” The Sages ruled that a “distant journey” was defined as a distance too far to allow the person to arrive at the Tabernacle or Temple by noon on the 14th when the Pesach sacrifices were offered. They calculated this to be 15 *mil*, or 30,000 cubits, which is between 8.5 and 11.3 miles (b.*Pesachim* 93b).

However, God instructs Moses that the exception for those on a distant journey was not to be abused. One must make every effort to plan his journeys in such a way that he would be present at the appointed time. One was not to make the exceptions a means of neglecting the Pesach festival. Pure neglect of the festival drew the penalty of *karat*, being cut off from one’s people (9:13).

Here we see, once again, that obedience to God is a heart issue. One who truly desired to obey God would, to the best of his ability, prepare his schedule in advance to be present on the appointed time. The exceptions, offered by God as a matter of mercy, are for those who are honestly unable to be at the Tabernacle or Temple at the appointed time. In this, God makes a way for the exigencies that are part of our fallen world. He remembers that we are dust, and gives allowances for those events in our lives over which we have no control. And this highlights the same theme that is woven throughout our *parashah*, namely, that God desires our fellowship, and as such, makes allowances for our weaknesses.

Our *parashah* ends with the description of God’s presence among the people of Israel, represented by a cloud covering the Mishkan by day, which took on the appearance of fire at night. This is what the Sages called the שְׁכִינָה *shechinah*, which means “royal residence,” and was particularly applied to the visible presence of God among His people. In post exilic times, the Sage ruled that the *Shechinah* was no longer visible, but the presence of God remained among His people wherever they resided. Thus, *Avot* teaches:

Avot 3:6 R. Halafta of Kefar Hananiah says, “Among ten who sit and work hard on Torah the Presence comes to rest, “as it is said, God stands in the congregation of God (Ps. 82:1). “And how do we know that the same is so even of five? For it is said, And he has founded his group upon the earth (Am. 9:6). “And how do we know that this is so even of three? Since it is said, And he judges among the judges (Ps. 82:1). “And how do we know that this is so even of two? Because it is said, Then they that feared the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord hearkened and heard (Mal. 3:16). “And how do we know that this is so even of one? Since it is said, In every place where I record my name I will come to you and I will bless you (Ex. 20:24).”

This is the connection with our Apostolic reading: “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” The mysterious presence of God among His people is a reality that must be received by faith. While among ancient Israel He revealed His presence in a visible manner, He did so in order to reveal what would always be the reality, that whether visible manifestations were given or not, He, the invisible One (cf. 1Tim 1:17) would make Himself known among His people. Faith brings what is not seen into the reality of one’s life (Heb 11:1). In the same way that

the cloud and fire, representing the invisible Almighty One, led the people of Israel in their wilderness journey, so the Spirit of God leads us today. He does so through illuminating the Scriptures to us, so that we are able to apply them in wisdom to the events of our lives. He also leads us through inner urgings in accordance with the Scriptures. The Spirit witnesses with our spirit to assure us of our sonship (Rom 8:16), and enables us to walk as children of light.

We may wish, at times, that His leading would be as evident as it must have been to the children of Israel! Yet if we stop to ponder the mystery of His abiding Spirit, we recognize that He leads us just as clearly as He led Israel of old. We are privileged to have the completed written word, and the record of God's dealings with His people throughout the millennia of earth's history. We have a map in far greater detail than did the children of Israel in the wilderness, for we also have come to know the Father through the testimony of His Son, Who lived and walked among our people. We may be assured that as we trust the Lord, and commit ourselves to acknowledge Him in all of ways, that He will direct our paths (Prov 3:5–6).

Our *haftarah* passage also has a clear link to our Torah *parashah*. In Zechariah's vision, he sees a large golden menorah, with seven branches. The parallel to the menorah of the Tabernacle is obvious. The differences, however, are also evident. The menorah of Zechariah's vision has spouts connected to each of the bowls on the menorah branches, and two olive trees on either side which give an unending supply of oil to the menorah through two golden pipes (v. 12). The prophet inquires twice about the meaning of the vision, and particularly about what the two olive trees represent. The first time, (vv. 6–10) the answer does not seem to fit the question. God describes the success of Zerubbabel in rebuilding the Temple, and that he would do so, not by his own strength nor by the strength of military power, but through the agency of the Holy Spirit (v. 6). But, in fact, the first answer to Zechariah's question about the meaning of the olive trees is clear: the restoration of the Temple, and Israel's ability to fulfill her role as God's light to the nations, would come about by divine initiative. The olive trees represent God's sovereign ability and purpose to restore Israel. The second time the prophet inquires about the meaning of the olive trees (v. 11), the answer he receives is: "These are the two anointed ones who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth." The two anointed ones must be Joshua and Zerubbabel, who represent the anointed priest and king respectively, and are each a foreshadow of the final and ultimate priest and king, the Messiah. It is when the office of priest and king are combined in the reigning Messiah of the LORD that the vision of Zechariah will be completed, for He also would build the Temple of the LORD (cf. Zech 6:12–13). The Temple that would be rebuilt under the rule of Joshua and Zerubbabel was only a foreshadowing of the final Temple in which the Messiah, Himself priest and king, would reign. Moreover, the fact that the rebuilding of the Temple by Zerubbabel and Joshua would be accomplished by divine strength also foreshadowed the work of the Messiah Who would carry out a work possible only by God Himself.

The *haftarah* as well as the Apostolic reading thus both emphasize the same theme of the Torah *parashah*, namely, the purpose of God to dwell among His people, and to secure their success through His presence. In the final analysis, is this not the ultimate goal of our faith, that He should be our God, and we should be His people? Is not the purpose of the covenant to bring about the close and abiding fellowship between God and His people? And we know that this was the very purpose for Yeshua's coming, that He might save His people from their sins (Matt 1:21) and make of them one family fit for the dwelling of the Almighty.

Eph 2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Messiah Yeshua Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.