



Celebrating 10 Years of Ten Minutes of Torah

Shavuot Study Guide—Parashat B'haalot'cha

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What better time is there to celebrate *Ten Minutes of Torah* than on Shavuot! Like many Jewish holidays, Shavuot has its origins as an agricultural festival. The word *shavuot* means “weeks,” and Shavuot refers to the period of seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. The timing of the festival marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. Our ancestors would bring an offering from their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple such offerings could no longer be made. Over time, this offering was replaced by reading the Ten Commandments and the Book of Ruth. By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, Shavuot became associated with the Ten Commandments and the festival became known as *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the “Time of the Giving of the Law.”

One of the most distinctive customs of Shavuot is *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, an evening-long study session held on the night of Shavuot. *Tikkun* means a “set order” of something and refers to the order in which the texts are read. The custom originated with the mystics of Safed in the 16th century, and today, many Jews stay up all night on Shavuot reading and studying a variety of sacred texts. Traditionally, readings from the Torah and Talmud are included.

Many synagogues hold a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Some host programs that go on all night, culminating in morning services at sunrise. Other congregations gather for a few hours of study. Whether one is planning to attend an all-night session, study for a few hours, join with others, or study on one's own, Shavuot is a wonderful time to encounter sacred text.

We asked several rabbis on the staff of the Union for Reform Judaism to share their own encounters with our text. Each video explores a different text. Some focus on a commandment. Others challenge a difficult passage, while others grapple with age-old questions.

These videos provide interesting responses to our sacred writings whether you are studying with others or watching these videos on your own. This guide offers a couple of questions to accompany the video, spark conversation, and give the reader an opportunity for further reflection.

Rabbi Marla Feldman, Executive Director, Women of Reform Judaism

Text—*Parashat B'haalot'cha*, Numbers 8:1–12:15

reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/bhaalotcha

Summary:

- God speaks to Moses, describing the menorah for the Tent of Meeting. The Levites are appointed to serve as assistants under Aaron and his sons. (8:1–26)
- Those who are unable to celebrate Passover during Nisan are given a time in the month of Sivan to observe a “second Passover.” (9:1–14)
- A cloud by day and fire by night show God’s Presence over the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifts from the Tabernacle, the people leave Sinai, setting out on their journey, tribe by tribe. (9:15–10:36)
- The Israelites complain about the lack of meat, and Moses becomes frustrated. God tells him to appoint a council of elders. God provides the people with meat and then strikes them with a very severe plague. (11:1–34)
- Miriam and Aaron talk about the “Cushite woman” whom Moses has married. In addition, they complain that God speaks not only through Moses but also through them. Miriam is struck with leprosy, and Moses begs God to heal her. After her recovery, the people resume their journey. (12:1–16)

Questions:

In this portion, Miriam is stricken with a skin disease and is sent out of the camp for seven days. This comes as a result of confronting her brother Moses over a family matter. What are the risks and rewards of confronting authority?

Rabbi Feldman has written a moving midrash (see *Miriam’s Fringes below*), allowing us to sense what Miriam experienced during her period of exile from the camp. What pages are missing from the text of our own lives? What would we fill in those pages?

MIRIAM'S FRINGES

Rabbi Marla J. Feldman

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married... As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales. When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. And Aaron said to Moses, 'O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away.' So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, 'O God, pray heal her!'"

Numbers 12:1, 10-13

What a devastating moment. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. Did I even breathe? My body was no longer my own, it had become estranged from me. In the blink of an eye my flesh became my enemy, no longer protecting my inner self but attacking, attacking... Body verses Soul.

After the shock, I felt the anger. Who to blame? First Aaron, then Moses... then God. Poor Aaron couldn't do anything right. The first thing he did was go running to Moses and pray the illness would not afflict him also. Aaron was pitiful, almost funny. He couldn't even say the word! I was "stricken with scales." As if saying it... L-E-P-R-O-S-Y... made it more contagious. I think he knew that if he said it out loud it would become real, and that reality was too frightening.

And Moses... I sometimes wonder if he would have done anything had Aaron not begged him. Even then, the most Moses could muster was a mere five words on my behalf.¹ For forty years he pleaded on behalf of our bedraggled band of ex-slaves, yet all he could squeeze out for his own sister was five words! 'O-God-pray-heal-her.' Big Deal. I used to think Moses looked so serene, so spiritual when he wrapped himself for prayer and uttered the magical sounds he learned at Sinai. But now, I see that the fringes protect him from the horrors of the world, separate him from the pain which might intrude on his meditations.

Despite my anger I knew my brothers loved me. But they disappointed me. I was overwhelmed with pain and horror and my own family was no help. They were either absent or annoying; either way I couldn't deal with them. They let me down when I needed them most. I understand their fear, though I can't say I completely forgive it. Seeing it happen to me must have made them realize it could happen to them too. What a terrifying thought that must have been. They needed to believe there was a reason, a cause, something that would immunize them. So they acted like it was my fault... something I did made me sick. They blamed me...

Soon the desperation and the fear engulfed me. Moses could not pronounce me fit to remain in the camp because he was not a priest. Aaron and his sons couldn't do anything for me because of our familial relation.² Suddenly there was not much cause for hope. No mortal could relieve my suffering... it was up to God...

"But the Lord said to Moses, 'If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted. After that the people set out from Hazereth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.'"

Numbers 12: 14-16

They just got up and moved on, as if nothing had changed. No one even asked what happened during the seven days I dwelled at the edge of the camp. If they had asked, I could have taught them something, something about

pain and death, and something about life. How ironic that my curse became a blessing. Living among the fringes, I discovered courage and hope; in adversity I found faith.

At first I couldn't see for my anger. I cried. I screamed. I denounced a God who would act so capriciously. I searched for a reason, some way to make sense out of my pain. Was God teaching me a lesson? Was God using me as an example to others who would challenge authority?³ Was this experience part of some divine plan?

If the lesson was about suffering, I learned it well. I felt a pain of the flesh and a pain of the spirit so great, so overwhelming... I felt enveloped in blackness that was emptiness. As if I was withdrawing into the black hole of my own soul, falling into a well that was so deep, so remote, that no other could reach me. Part of me longed for the touch of another; part of me felt protected by the darkness surrounding me. Any touch would have made the pain unbearable. I thrived on my anger and self-pity. My heart was heavy with sadness at the loss of everything that held meaning for me, loss of my flesh, loss of my Self. Anger, self-pity, sorrow—these became my friends, my comrades, my blankets against the cold, harsh emptiness.

Eventually my eyes adjusted to the dark. Or, maybe, my focus changed, and this was the miracle after all. I saw that I was not alone at the bottom of my well. With me were the other marginal people, the malcontents, the rejects, the forgotten, the holy.⁴ At first I merely observed the others, the ghostlike shadows that skirted the fringes, moving in and out of the light, barely visible. In my fascination with these images I forgot about my own pain. Here were people—or were they angels—going about their daily business, rising in the morning, eating their meals, observing mitzvot, caring for one another... here was life! Life! Here were the outcasts of humanity, accepting their lives on their own terms, neither denying nor acquiescing. Here were broken bodies rising to each new day, clinging to a life where each pain-filled breath was an act of courage. Here were wounded souls that transcended their corporeal limits in order to remain in the corporeal world. Here were heroes.

Their images remain imprinted on my spirit. A mother in mourning, offering her full breast to a stranger's child, too weak to cry. A young man, skeletal, shaky, feeding another his final meal. Children with arms around each other, protecting each other from the daily horrors of life among the shadows. One woman gently preparing another for burial, hands curled and racked with pain, hoping there would be someone for her, when her time comes. An old man telling stories of the world beyond, teaching the children to sing...

For seven days I dwelled with the fringes. I discovered a world in that time. I learned more about love and faith and true charity in my exile than from all of God's or Moses's mitzvot. I learned what is, and what is not, important in life. I learned that illness is neither a source of shame nor of pride. I have lost some heroes, but I have found others to replace them. I am no longer angry with Aaron or Moses... they are who they are, frail, fearful, self-absorbed. Nor am I angry with God for I know that my illness was not a punishment nor a test, but a difficult part of living. I don't even regret my suffering, for without it I would not know faith. I still fear death, but it is no longer a lonely fear.

When I dance now, I gather my timbrels and dance around the edges of the camp. When I sing of God's glory, the forgotten heroes are my chorus. When I am in need of healing, I drink from the well that gave me sustenance in my despair.⁵ And when I pray, these are the fringes with which I wrap myself for warmth and strength and courage.

Endnotes

- 1 The brevity of Moses's prayer is a source of praise. Mekhilta Beshallah 4:7; Vayassa 1:99.
- 2 Leviticus Rabba 15:8.
- 3 Numerous sources explain Miriam's affliction as punishment for slander and/or malice against Moses. See, e.g. Numbers Rabba 7:5, Leviticus Rabba 17:3, Deuteronomy Rabba 6:8,9.
- 4 The term "shut" out of the camp has been construed to suggest that Miriam was sent to the mines with the other malcontents. Deuteronomy Rabba 6:12.
- 5 Miriam's well was said to have healing powers. Leviticus Rabba 22:4.