



Parashat Beha'alotkha – May 28, 2021 – 17 Sivan, 5781

Dear TBE Friends and Family,

In the days before electrification the rooms in which people gathered after dusk were typically illuminated by candles placed on a table or other low surface. The lamps' purpose was, obviously, to cast light on the activities the inhabitants of the space were engaged in, facilitating their efficient execution.

On specific occasions, though - Chanukah being the most notable example - Jews were asked to deploy light in a manner that departed from this norm. They/we were instructed to place candles (or oil lamps) in an elevated location so the flames would illuminate the length and breadth of the room. Positioned in this fashion, the lights functioned much like the permeable roofing of a *sukkah* (known as *s'khakh*), which encourages inhabitants of the space to draw their gaze upwards, towards the heavens, and outwards, towards those with whom they share the space.

It is this inspirational, as opposed to instrumental, use of light that is celebrated in this week's Torah portion (Parashat Beha'alotkha), which describes the construction, installation and use of the *menorah*, the seven-branched candelabra that graced our sacred precincts (the Tabernacle and Temple) in days of yore. While other elements of the ritual accoutrements of that ancient era – the firepans, altars, censers etc – were largely forgotten as our mode of worship evolved, the menorah endured, at least symbolically, becoming an instantly recognizable symbol of the Jewish people itself, and of our peoplehood. In addition, the *ner tamid* (eternal light), in place of the menorah, became a feature of Jewish sacred spaces whose centrality endures to our day.

What was it about the menorah that made it so enduring? Some would argue that it was the metaphoric resemblance between the ritual candelabra and the Jewish people: both structured as a many-armed entity, joined at its base, in which the light of each appendage intensified and invigorated that of its peers. I prefer to think that it was the manner in which the warm glow of the menorah's



light – or the light of any ceremonial flame – encourages us to identify in one another’s visage the face of Divinity.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat – and extended weekend – of uplifting light and Presence, with particular thought given to those members of our community who have served this country in uniform – and also to those who are being elevated this weekend and in coming weeks through academic graduations, promotions and (sigh!) retirements.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Rachel Safman