



Parashat Beha'alotcha

A Parade of Welcome

by Rabbi James Greene on Friday May 28, 2010

15 Sivan 5770

Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

In this week's Torah portion, *Beha'alotcha*, we read one of the most profound phrases in the entire bible. Numbers chapter 10 tells us that, "They [the Israelites] marched from the mountain of God a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of God traveled in front of them on that three day journey to seek out a resting place for them; and God's cloud kept above them by day, as they moved on from camp. When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O God! May Your enemies be scattered and may Your foes flee before you! Return, O God, You who are Israel's myriad of thousands!"

The image of this community marching through the wilderness is enough to get the blood pumping. It is the same mythic story we reenact each Shabbat morning as the Torah is taken from the Ark and processed around the congregation. What an incredible story!

Sefer Ha'agadah (The Book of Legends) offers a *midrash* about what this journey must have looked like. It teaches, "A sign would appear in the cloud for Moses when it was about to move. When he saw by this sign that the cloud was about to move, he would say, 'Rise up, O Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered' (Num. 10:35). Then the cloud moved. As the cloud moved, all made preparations for the journey and began loading their utensils. Whoever had an animal would load the utensils on it, and the cloud would take on the rest. After all the utensils were loaded, the trumpets sounded and Judah, led by his standard, set out: first Judah's prince, and then his tribe. The other tribes followed in the same order—'every man to his own standard, according to the emblems' (Num. 2:2)."

The idea that each tribe within the larger congregation of Israel moved in its own unique way is appealing to me as an advocate for equality and inclusion. If the LGBTQ community is its own tribe (or perhaps more accurately a set of tribes) within the congregation of Israel, it is liberating to know that we each have the freedom to travel the journey of the Jewish people as we see fit. Moreover, the congregation of Israel is required to take everyone along for the ride; everyone fits into the caravan to Israel!



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I love the idea that the Queer community can set its own destiny and travel its own journey within the story of the Jewish people. It invites us to open up Jewish tradition and turn things on their head as we seek an authentic path. We do this by reshaping traditional life cycle events or developing creative new rituals to mark unique moments in our lives, subverting the hetero-normative nature of biblical literature in favor of a path which questions the text in new and interesting ways or searching for new meaning.

No matter what path we take, each of us is given the opportunity to pick up the Torah and continue the journey of the Israelites. As we remove the Torah from the Ark and call upon God to line up all the different tribes of Israel to continue the journey of the Jewish people, I am continually called to join in and be counted among this community which is as old as time. May this week be one of joining in the journey. Just as our ancestors felt called to create a welcoming community, may we be blessed to be welcomed and to welcome others as we continue in the tradition of our ancestors.



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