



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Beha'lotcha 5769

By Sam Berrin Shonkoff

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In a just nation, power is distributed among all people. To achieve this ideal, leaders need the humility to empower their own citizens, and grassroots communities need the audacity to actively shape society. In *Parshat Beha'lotcha*, we see that Moses understands this need for power-sharing.

Near the end of the *parshah*, Miriam and Aaron pose an extremely important question: "Has YHWH spoken only through Moses? Has God not also spoken through us?"<sup>1</sup> Rashi writes that "us" here refers to Miriam and Aaron.<sup>2</sup> But, in the context of this *parshah*,<sup>3</sup> it seems more likely that "us" refers to all of *Am Yisrael*. Immediately after Miriam and Aaron utter this protest, the Torah states, "And the man Moses was very humble, more so than any human on the face of the earth."<sup>4</sup> This juxtaposition of Miriam and Aaron's question with a statement about Moses's humility reflects an optimum political dynamic. Miriam and Aaron essentially assert that no leader has a monopoly on truth and power, and the text suggests that Moses is humble enough to appreciate this fact.

Humility not only enables Moses to understand his role as a leader, it inspires him to empower the Israelites. Earlier in our *parshah*, God extends Moses's prophetic abilities to 70 elders.<sup>5</sup> One might expect Moses to flex his power at this politically vulnerable moment when others suddenly acquire his spiritual capacities.<sup>6</sup> Joshua urges him to take charge of the situation: "Moses, my lord, restrict them!" he cries.<sup>7</sup> But Moses does not feel threatened by an empowered populace. Instead, he responds, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of YHWH were prophets!"<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Moses, who is eager to share his power with the people, there are many political figures in the world today whose thirst for power drowns out the voices of their own citizens. In Burma, for example, oppressive military regimes have held control since 1962. In democratic elections in 1990, the Burmese people officially ousted the junta by voting overwhelmingly for the National League for Democracy, the opposition party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Yet the military refused to give up power: it put Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and has held her there for most of the last 19 years.<sup>9</sup> For generations, the military junta has also violently suppressed pro-democracy demonstrations of Burmese students, Buddhist monks and nuns and other civilians. The regime continues to inflict severe human rights abuses against the country's ethnic minorities, especially in the conflict areas of eastern Burma.

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<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 12:2.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi on Bamidbar 12:2.

<sup>3</sup> In *Parshat Beha'lotcha*, God endows 70 Israelites with the power of prophecy (Bamidbar 11:16-30). This boldly demonstrates that God can and does speak through many people in the nation.

<sup>4</sup> Bamidbar 12:3.

<sup>5</sup> Bamidbar 11:16-17, 11:24-30.

<sup>6</sup> Bamidbar 11:17, Bamidbar Rabbah 15:25.

<sup>7</sup> Bamidbar 11:28.

<sup>8</sup> Bamidbar 11:29.

<sup>9</sup> Suu Kyi currently faces charges of violating her house arrest. The case has been called a "show trial" intended to keep her detained during the regime's promised elections next year. Aung Hla Tun, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi ill, court delays trial." *Alertnet*, 29 May 2009.

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SP421343.htm>.

Citizens of democratic nations must challenge political systems that marginalize and persecute their own people. Yet many of us today inadvertently support the consolidation of power in the hands of a few leaders. The humility of Moses and the question of Miriam and Aaron grow dim in our consciousness. We glorify the actions of presidents, prime-ministers and armies, even though the vast majority of national life always occurs at the grassroots level. The media reinforces this fallacy by disproportionately publicizing the actions of government leaders over the actions of community leaders. But effective NGOs and community-based organizations around the world deserve our attention and support. They are strongholds and mouthpieces for the power of the people.

In places like Burma, where it appears that the government holds all of the power, grassroots NGOs are effecting tremendous change. One example is Palaung Women's Organization (PWO), which empowers women and communities of the Palaung ethnic minority. In one PWO-run project, young women participate in a six-month course in democracy, human rights and women's rights in which they receive training in English, computer use and group-facilitation skills.<sup>10</sup> Learning about and supporting grassroots organizations like PWO is essential for anyone who genuinely cares about global issues. It is a critical way of ensuring that power is shared between a people and its government.

*Parshat Beha'alotcha* begins with a description of the *menorah*, an image that can serve as a model for the just distribution of power in a society. The structure of the *menorah* eloquently symbolizes the ideal political structure of a nation. It is "gold from base to petal"<sup>11</sup> and made from one block of material.<sup>12</sup> God instructs, "The seven lamps shall illuminate the face of the *menorah*," not only the high branches.<sup>13</sup> While all parts of the *menorah* are fundamentally one, so are all parts of the nation. Just as the lamps should not overshadow the *menorah's* body, leaders should not overshadow the masses. Like the *menorah*, let governments and citizens around the world kindle a balanced light of power and humility.



Sam Berrin Shonkoff is currently the Jewish student life coordinator at Stanford Hillel. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies from Brown University and has also studied in Jerusalem at Hebrew University, Pardes Institute and The Conservative Yeshiva. Sam's passions include backpacking, meditation, friends and family, writing, dancing and social action. He believes that mindful engagement with Torah can be a way for us to encounter ourselves and others more intimately. Sam can be reached at [samshonkoff@gmail.com](mailto:samshonkoff@gmail.com).

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<sup>10</sup> "Palaung Women's Organization," <http://www.palaungwomen.org/>. Palaung Women's Organization has been an AJWS project partner since 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Bamidbar 8:4.

<sup>12</sup> Shemot: 25:31.

<sup>13</sup> Bamidbar 8:2. See Rashi on Bamidbar 8:2.

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