

[Kohelet Discussion](#)

**Parshah Beha'alotcha**

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This parsha brings us, Pesach Sheni, or the second Passover. This gives those who were ritually impure and not able to perform the Passover sacrifice during Passover an opportunity to do so now. Moses has to deal with constant complaints, mostly about the food. Everyone is tired of manna. This causes Moses to have an emotional breakdown. God instructs Moses to appoint 70 elders to help him govern. Finally, Aaron and Miriam engage in lashon hara about Moses and his wife. Miriam is punished with leprosy and Moses prays for her recovery.

I'd like to focus on why the people complained and the significance of Moses's emotional crisis. At this point the Israelites are in a different place, physically and spiritually than earlier. They are far enough away from Egypt that they are no longer escaping from slavery. They are journeying toward freedom. Amalek is in the past. At one time they complained because they didn't have water. That was legitimate and Moses managed it. Now, however, they have everything they need, at least materially. But they're bored. The manna isn't exciting. They seem to have forgotten that they were not in Egypt on vacation. They were enslaved. Suddenly they are nostalgic for all the wonderful things they had in Egypt: meat, melons, cucumbers, etc. They wish to go back, and Moses becomes their scapegoat.

Human nature being what it is, this is probably not a surprising development. Moses, who often seems superhuman, has a very human reaction. He falls apart. He asks God, basically, "Why me?" and prays to die. He feels completely alone and is sure that he has failed. Thinking about it, he was given an almost impossible, superhuman task. Could anyone succeed in transforming a group of slaves into thoughtful, responsible people in only 40 years? Societal movements and changes sometimes take generations.

What can we learn from Moses as he navigates through the lowest point in his life? When we go through such a crisis, we often feel helpless and alone. We feel that we have no effect on anyone and wonder if there is any purpose left to our lives. We feel that we have failed in our life's work—in the most important task we have been given.

God tells Moses that he is not alone, but He does not make everything all better for him. Judaism doesn't promise us that we will never have moments of great despair, but it does tell us that we are never alone. During this time Moses is able to forge a deeper spiritual connection to God. As he does this, he shows us what it means to be truly humble. From this we learn that greatness and humility go hand in hand. One doesn't work without the other.

There was only one Moses, but all of us, as Jews, are given a superhuman, nearly impossible task. We're supposed to repair the world. No wonder we are subject to despair. The world never seems to get any better. Or, if it does and we think we have made progress, the clock suddenly gets rolled back to clock by several centuries. Maybe we just go in circles.

As we go through the latest wave of covid (fifth, sixth??), as our country endures continuing extreme political polarization, and as we read about yet another mass shooting every week, we are weary. We wonder if this is going to go on forever. We wonder if we will ever be able to be social again, if we will ever feel like we can disagree civilly, and if we will ever feel safe again. We feel isolated and disconnected. Early in the pandemic, the good in people came shining through. But as the pandemic wore on, the worst in people seemed to manifest itself. Thousands of people have suffered mental health crises and have endured horrendous losses. Society, as a whole may be in a state of a mental breakdown.

In many crises, something good may eventually emerges. A person who has recovered from a deep episode of depression feels a sense of joy when that mental state is behind him. I am looking for something good to emerge from the times we are living in, but I don't know what it is yet. Can we use this time for a deeper connect both with God and with our fellow humans? Can we reframe success and failure and move forward in a positive way? Can we do important things, and yet be humble enough to realize how small we really are and how we are part of a project much bigger than we will ever be? Can we make something good out of all the pain there is in the world?