Parasha Beha'Alotcha

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת-הַנֵּרֹת אֶל-מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:

This parasha is set in the wilderness during the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan. The Levites hold a special role as the priestly tribe, responsible for the Tabernacle services. The cultural significance of sacrifice, leadership, and community organization is pivotal: The centrality of the Tabernacle emphasizes the importance of God's presence. The Israelites are learning to depend on divine guidance and community structure as they grow into a nation. Fire by night and cloud by day? What is that about? This parasha informs us how God lead them along this journey… He never left them… One of the most famous of ancient Israel's symbols of God's presence is the bush that was aflame yet would not be consumed. That startling image has been taken both as a representation of a living faith and of the unquenchable spirit of the Jewish people. The burning bush has become the logo for countless Jewish institutions and adorns innumerable Torah mantles in synagogues all over the world. No less striking a biblical symbol is the pillar that led the Israelites through the wilderness. As the Torah explains: *"On the day that the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Meeting; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning."* Every evening, the fire would settle down, showing the Israelites where to pitch their camp, and in the morning, the cloud would move forward, pointing the way the Israelites were to proceed. The Torah points out that this miraculous fire/cloud was the very locus of God's presence, the voice of Adonai spoke from amidst this flaming smoke, and it was this combination of fire and cloud that was a permanent sign that God was the ultimate leader of the Israelites tribes throughout their wandering. According to the Biblical scholar, Jacob Milgrom, this fire was in the center of the cloud and became visible in the dark or when God wanted to summon Moshe to a special audience. The fire was known as God's kavod, God's glory. In the Tanakh, the kavod appeared to only three of Israel's leaders; to Moshe, to Aaron, and to Samuel, conferring a high level of distinction on each of them. This perplexing symbol, unlike the burning bush, doesn't adorn any Torah mantles, and hasn't been adopted by any Jewish organization as its sign to the world. Perhaps because it seems more flamboyant, it rarely made its way into graphic representation. Yet the Midrash is filled with references to it that give it an illumination in its own right.

For example; The Mekhilta points out that God's kavod played a special role in defeating the Egyptian soldiers when the Israelites were escaping to freedom: the fire made the ground so hot that the chariots stuck in the melting mud, trapping the cruel soldiers so the slaves could make it to freedom.

The Midrash Kaneh states that the cloud performed an additional miracle, containing two Hebrew letters: "Yud" and "Heh". Those two letters spell one of God's names, the name through which God created the world. Those letters would point the Israelites in the proper direction each morning, assuring that their march toward the Promised Land would succeed as God had planned. Melekhet ha'Mishkan notes that the Cloud would proceed when and where God wanted it to, but as a courtesy to Moshe, it would stop in front of him and await his actual instruction to depart or to return. Moshe would shout *"Kuma Adonai (Arise, God!)"* and *"Shuva Adonai (Return, God!)"* and the cloud would respond to his words. We use those same words in our Shabbat Torah service in the synagogue. According to the Midrash Yalkut, the radiance of the Cloud and Fire was a brilliant purple, which shone like the sun and the stars. Heathens who saw it from a distance were frightened of the Israelites and were also moved to praise God for this newest miracle. The Midrash also points out that the miraculous robes the Israelites were given by the angels were made in that same beautiful purple, so that they shone like God's kavod as they paraded through the desert. The Midrash Sifre notes that it was the Kavod, the fire and cloud that waited while Miriam was recovering from her bout of Tzara'at, that forced the Israelites to wait for her too. Thus, the Cloud of Glory lent special dignity to this worthy Prophet in the sight of the Israelites in the camp. By adding these fanciful details to the raw majesty of the Torah's portrayal of the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, the Midrash connects the Pillar to the Creation of the world (through the link of God's name), to the miracle of Yetziyat Mitzrayim (the going out of Egypt), to the authority of Moshe (hence of the entire Torah and the Revelation at Mt. Sinai). Thus all the major strands of Torah theology, the marvel of God's Creation, the passion of God's liberation, and the gift of God's revelation are combined in this wonderful symbol: a pillar of cloud and of fire. In a place where words cannot go, our path is illumined for us by the radiant light of God's Kavod.

"*Mai shamayim*, what are the heavens?" asks the Gemara about the second day of Creation when earth and heavens came to be separate entities (Ta'anit 12a). "An old teaching answers: *aish u'mayim*, fire and water. Adonai scrambled them together each in the other and made from them the firmament." Aish u'mayim (אש ומים) becomes shamayim (שמים), the letters themselves combining to make something new out of these essential elements. We imagine that mixing fire and water should eliminate one of the elements, fire should evaporate water or water should quench fire, but the coexistence of these apparent opposites is essential to Divine creation. In *Parasha Beha'Alotcha*, we see this astonishing combination established on earth, at the center of the Israelite camp, *shamayim* in our midst letting us witness and respond to the presence of Adonai. Reading Numbers 9:15-16 it says, *"On the day that the Mishkan was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Meeting; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning."*

The cloud is cloud (water vapor) during the day and fire at night, and the daily passage between these two substances cultivates in the desert wanderers an understanding of these opposite elements as essentially one and the same. In a discussion of halakha, on the timing of lighting Shabbat candles (must it be precisely at sundown, or can it be earlier?), the Talmud (Shabbat 23b) wonders about the daily transitions. Citing Exodus 13:22, *"The pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, did not depart from before the people,"* Rabbi Yosi concludes that fire and cloud must coexist for a period each day. *"The pillar of cloud completes the pillar of fire; and the pillar of fire completes the pillar of cloud."* To this day, as we light Shabbat candles while light remains in the sky, we embody the moment of transition, the passage from cloud to fire during which these two opposites coexist, neither destroying the other but instead co-creating a spark/fog of Divine presence, *shamayim* right in front of our faces. During the wilderness wandering, this cloud/fire cultivated in all of the Israelites a very sensitive attention to its presence *(Numbers 9:17 & 21-22): And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. ...Day or night, whenever the cloud lifted, they would break camp. Whether it was two days or a month or a year, however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle, the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp."* A cloud is there and not there, a space of air with more concentration of water vapor than the air around it. A cloud can be seen, but it is subtle. Easy to miss. You might have to look twice to be sure whether it is there or gone. So, the Israelites must have developed a finely calibrated responsiveness to that cloud to be able to notice after it was on the *mishkan* for a few hours, or a few days, or for years—that it was suddenly gone from that spot, beckoning them yet again to collapse the camp and enter the desert. The Divine invited the whole people to attune themselves to presence as Moshe had attuned himself. How long must he have gazed at the bush in order to realize the flames were not consuming it? Here, the entire people learns a spiritual practice of our teacher—to watch carefully and notice the Divine in subtle shifts in the environment. In the transition from Egypt, watered by the Nile, to the land of Israel, dependent on rain, learning to give our attention to the cloud was a lifesaving act. Perhaps our ever cloud-watching desert wandering prepared us to notice when the water gates of the heavens would open, giving us existence from the outpouring abundance of rain.

This careful attunement is also the energy that links lover and beloved. Midrash (Yelamdenu 51) uses a parable to read our cloud as a link back to Sinai and a promise of public affection: *The cloud covering the mishkan is the same cloud that revealed itself at Mount Sinai. To what is this similar? To a king who had a lover. He sent a message: "Prepare yourself, for I will come to you on a certain day!" The lover did not believe it.*

He replied: "Even if he comes to me he will come disguised as an ordinary person or at night." The king understood what his lover said and sent back: "By your life I will come to you during the day, in public, riding the horse I rode on the day I became king, and wearing the purple cloak that was thrown upon me on the day I became ruler—so that all will know how beloved you are to me." **The midrash reads God (the king) appeasing the skeptical Israelites (the lover) when they worried that God would not come into the *mishkan* they had built. God transformed the one-night encounter of Sinai into a love affair that could span space and time by appearing in the cloud on the *mishkan*, in the same royal cloak that God had donned at Sinai (*Exodus 19:9, I will come to you in a thick cloud*). The cloud itself evokes attentive and responsive presence as each lover learns to turn towards the other. Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum (who was murdered in the Warsaw Ghetto) carefully reads Numbers 9:16 to extend this Divine presence, initiated at Sinai, beyond the wilderness wandering and into our present moment. While many commentators read the verse, *"It would always be so: the cloud covered it, appearing as fire by night,"* as referencing God's continuous presence in the wilderness, Rabbi Nissenbaum is quoted saying: *"The Holy Blessed One promised us that this is how it would be also in the future, if there would come times 'when the cloud covers it,' that black clouds cover the skies and no spark of hope can be seen, with no chance of exit from the terrible situation, we will not despair, rather it is promised that even then 'the appearance of fire by night'—from the cloud and the darkness of night a sliver of light will burst forth, the clouds will part and salvation will come."* As we watch carefully for the cloud, may we also witness slivers of light, and by their shining, know love.**

God manifested His presence as a cloud and fire among the Israelites. Since He is invisible, God reveals Himself in visible ways. In the Tanakh, manifestations varied: as fire, a cloud, in human form, or even as an angel (Genesis 18:1-2, Exodus 24:9-10). Here's the key: Though invisible, God makes His presence visible to His people. When the scripture says people saw the invisible God as in Exodus 24:9-10, it usually refers to His expressed visible manifestations. Moreover, the pillar wasn't merely symbolic; it was the actual presence of God. While the Ark of the Covenant symbolized God's presence, the cloud, Shekinah, that rested upon it was the real deal. This wasn't just any natural cloud but a supernatural cloud visible to everyone (Exodus 14:19). In the Brit Chadasha, God's presence, once observed by Jews from a distance, resides in believers. Accepting Yeshua fills your 'temple' with the Shekinah cloud, just as in the Tanakh. That visible pillar was but a foreshadowing of the greater gifts that Messiah brings. God's presence now accompanies you around the clock, guiding your steps. Although we do not have the constant awe-factor of seeing a visible cloud, what is in the believer far exceeds what the Israelites saw with their physical eyes, we have better things in Yeshua. You see, the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness now finds its home in the hearts of believers in our modern spiritual wilderness.

The truth is that the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire are both representations of Yeshua and his leading and care for us. First of all, we should note that the pillar of cloud and of fire was a manifestation of God Himself, as Exodus 13:21-22 says: *By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. [22] Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people*". You need to put this together with the fact that Yeshua claimed to be the God of the Exodus, when He applied the sacred name of God to Himself; Yeshua said. *Very truly I tell you…before Avraham was born, I am!* This is undeniably a direct reference to the very beginning of the story of the Exodus, when Adonai Himself appeared to Moshe at the burning bush, and asked him to go to Egypt to free His people. In this way, Yeshua claimed to be the God of the Exodus, and it was therefore Yeshua who manifested Himself through the pillar of cloud and fire. There is a powerful lesson in this description of how the Yeshua guided His people. The presence of a mighty, swirling pillar of fire would normally be a terrifying phenomenon. But not when it benevolently gave the children of Israel light, and protection from their enemies at night in the terrifying desert. Clouds that blot out the sun weren't necessarily a welcome sight in a society that was based on agriculture and the produce of the land. But it was welcome when you had to walk through a seemingly never-ending desert, especially when the children of Israel knew that it was Adonai Himself who was guiding them and showing them the way.

The lesson is that Adonai always knows what we need best. If you had asked the Israelites what they needed, they probably wouldn't have come up with the idea of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That's because God always has better ways of giving us what we need, even when we don't know we need them! And just as what God gave his people was different in the night to what he gave them in the night, so too, he understands the different seasons of our lives, and that what we will need tomorrow is not what we need today. God will always provide for us just what we need at the time. In every season of your life, the Lord will provide what you most need. As we go through the various seasons of life, with their highs and lows, we will usually have an idea of what we need in our lives. The reality is that most people don't ultimately know what's best for their own lives. That's why we can often ask God for the wrong things. That's why Rav Sha'ul tells us in the Bible that, *…the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans* (Romans 8:26) Whole Christian churches have been built on the premise that God is there to give you the blessings you want in this life, according to our own wisdom and plans for our lives. The Jewish faith in the time of Messiah was largely based on these kinds of ideas also.

They wanted a Saviour for the Jewish; they got the Saviour of the World. They wanted a Mashiach Ben David who would kill their enemies; they got a leader who loved them. They wanted a king who would sit on a throne in the city of David; they got a condemned man who was nailed to a Cross. They wanted an eternal kingdom on earth; they received eternal life as a gift for all who would accept him. God's way was far better than any of their religious desires. That's the reason for the fire by night and cloud by day. The children of Israel never asked for this. They were far more interested in food. But God provided them with light and guidance by night, and with shade and leading in the desert by day. And he gave them food also. In every season of your life, if you trust in him, the Lord will provide what you most need, and not what you think you need or want. How deep is your commitment to the Lord? Are you willing to trust?

Consider the history behind this special cloud that accompanied the Israelites. This pillar of cloud and fire appeared right after the Passover Lamb was slain and eaten, and after the 10th Plague, the death of the firstborn (Exodus 12). It appeared first in Egypt. However, it would lead them to the Red Sea, across it, and then through the Wilderness all the way to the Promised Land. The pillar of cloud by day and fire by night was "to show them the way". It led them and could be followed by them 24/7. In Exodus and in our Parasha today the Cloud covered the tabernacle and filled it with the Lord's glory after Moshe set up everything and it was over the tabernacle throughout the entire journey. When (and only when) it ascended, they would pack up everything and depart, following it. It appeared as a cloud by day and as fire by night. The pillar was a guide for their unknown journey, and a "harmless sun" to show them the way. Reading 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, *"For I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. [2] They all were immersed into Moshe in the cloud and in the sea."* Personally, I believe that the Yom Suf (Red Sea) crossing was a foreshadowing of baptism unto salvation. The Israelites were baptized "in the cloud (Yeshua) and the sea", as we are baptized and born again "of the water and the spirit". Peter explained that when we are baptized, we receive the Holy Spirit. And I quote what I believe to be the Plan of Salvation from Acts 2:38-41, "Then Peter said to them, *'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Yeshua haMashiach for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Ruach haKodesh. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as Adonai our God will call.' And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.' Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."* So… I have a question…

If the water of the Red Sea crossing foreshadowed the water of baptism, what did the cloud and fire represent? Well, I think it is an obvious answer (to Me): The Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). Next question: What does the story about the cloud in Exodus and Numbers show us about the importance of the Holy Spirit, on our own spiritual journey? Note, before you answer recall that the cloud appeared for the first time, in the Exodus 13 account, after the Passover Lamb had been slain. Yeshua had to depart in order for the Spirit to come. This statement has had a great impact on me, helping me to better appreciate the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives today! The Spirit would be with them and would dwell in them just as it does for us today. The Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. As the Holy Spirit was involved in leading the people to the water, I believe the Spirit is involved in convicting people of sin and bringing them to Yeshua today as well, even before they enter the water! The Spirit would also guide them. The Spirit was involved at the beginning of everything as seen in Genesis 1:1-2. The Holy Spirit in Yeshua raised Him from the dead and now lives in us. Romans 8:11 tells us, *"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Yeshua from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Messiah from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."* With all that… another question arises; If the Israelites are the body of Messiah, the Red Sea is baptism, the time in the Wilderness is the time of testing here on earth, the Promised Land is the reward we are looking for at the end, and the righteous few (Joshua and Caleb) are those who will make it to the end… what are we to learn from the cloud in this parasha? I would say… Let us go only when and where the cloud leads us! The cloud is at the very center of their camp (the congregation). We should organize ourselves around it accordingly. The cloud is absolutely critical. It is more important than GPS, Waze or Google Maps to show us the way we need to go on our own spiritual journey. The cloud does not necessarily lead us by the fastest, most direct route. However, it leads us by the timing God intends, for our own good, and to accomplish His purposes. …ooh another question: How can we know where the Spirit is leading us, today? Is it just a feeling, or something that is primarily emotion-based? We know for sure that the Spirit reminded the apostles of everything that Yeshua said and led them into "all truth". We also know that the Spirit inspired the prophets. Therefore, anything that contradicts what the Word of God says cannot be from the Spirit! However, sometimes the Spirit can move us in a specific direction in life, apart from (but in no way contradicting) the Scriptures. Should we make plans in life (spiritually), or just pray and see 'where the Spirit leads us'? Acts 16:6-9 says, *"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Ruach ha'Kodesh to speak the word in Asia. [7] When they came to Mysia, they were trying to proceed into Bithynia, but the Ruach of Yeshua would not allow them. …Now a vision appeared to Sha'ul in the night. A man from Macedonia was standing and pleading with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!""*

Rav Sha'ul had a good plan, but the Spirit blocked it and had other ideas! The Spirit redirected him to Macedonia. Keep an open mind and pray for the Spirit to guide us.

Many Believers become discouraged when the plans they make in this life get derailed. However, be aware that the Spirit may be leading us in other, better directions. It is written in James 4:13-15, *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'"* As Yeshua instructed us, let us pray for the Adonai's will to be done, and ask for more of the Spirit. Pray for the Spirit to lead us individually and as a group and let us stay righteous and follow all the clear directions we have from the Spirit, in the Scriptures! Last question: If someone is not already following the clear instructions provided by the Spirit in the word of God… why should they think that the Spirit will put them into the 'bonus round' and give them even more, personalized direction? As we reflect on our parasha, let us remember the importance of being set apart for God's service, leaning on His guidance, and fostering unity within our communities. Let this be a time of recommitment to serve God faithfully in our lives and as part of our Messianic community, trusting in His guidance.

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")