



Navigating Uncertainty • Parshat Bamidbar

“To be a pioneer – as Jews know from our history – you have to be prepared to spend a long time in the wilderness,” wrote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his “Covenant and Conversation” essay on *parshat Noah*. This was the way he described the early Zionists who founded the State of Israel and the sacrifices they made to do so. We think of them with gratitude as we celebrate Israel’s 75th year of existence. We can also travel back in time to those who made the perilous forty-year journey from Egypt to Canaan or further still to Abraham, our first wilderness pioneer.

This embrace of uncertainty is stamped all over the book of *Bamidbar*, or Numbers, that we open this week to read the Torah portion that carries the same name. The Israelites spent a long time in a state of unknowing. They had no first-hand knowledge of where they were going. They did not believe, given the harsh conditions of the desert, that they would get there. They questioned the character and competence of their leaders, uncertain they could trust them in this wilderness, and unsure of God’s intentions. That’s a lot of uncertainty to carry.

According to *Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage*, Nogah Hareuveni uses “*midbar*” to refer to arid places with very little rainfall and also, and ironically, as places to graze animals on the margins of human habitation. We also recognize the root word as D-V-R as a thing or word. Some biblical scholars point out that D-V-R can mean

that which comes after or that which comes about as a result of something else. It can signify both being and becoming.

The wilderness is often characterized by silence, but our wilderness trek was filled with noise. We complained. We threatened. We cried. We challenged. In the wilderness, a donkey spoke while some leaders were silenced. An enemy gave us a blessing. Someone recently asked me why there is not one recorded circumcision in the book of Numbers. I responded simply that there are no births recorded in this book. There are only deaths. There is a steep price to pay when you travel in the wilderness. It’s a place you cross. You cannot stay there. The *midbar* is a provisional bridge between points of stability that can untether us if we stay too long.

No doubt, the Israelites also looked around them and up above them and murmured their wonder and gratitude at their very existence. This vulnerability of uncertainty may have allowed them the space, clarity and willingness to receive the Ten Commandments in a desert and not in our homeland; the ten *dibrot* – utterances that share a root with *midbar* - came to us where we least expected them. By giving them to us at Sinai rather than in Jerusalem, we could carry them wherever we went. Their wisdom had no geographic boundaries.

The *midbar* is a perfect metaphor for leadership.

Good leaders escort us through uncertainty. They provide the direction forward and offer their reassurances to keep going when we get stuck. In their *Harvard Business Review* article, 6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty (April 26, 2021), Rebecca Zucker and Darin Rowell invite leaders to embrace the discomfort of not knowing and relinquish the need to be right or be certain. They distinguish between leadership problems that are complicated and those that are complex. A complicated problem may be a technical one, where something must be broken down, often by experts, into its constituent parts in order to solve. A complex problem, however, is different. It may “contain many interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown and may change over time in unpredictable ways.” This may precipitate lots of confusion and opinions without obvious solutions. “As a result, solutions to complex challenges typically emerge through trial and error and require the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt.”

Zucker and Rowell ask leaders to let go of perfectionism, resist over-simplification and avoid drawing quick conclusions to remove oneself from uncertainty. They encourage leaders to find partners in the work of uncertainty and zoom out because being too close to a problem can vitiate the capacity to see it for what it is. Creating distance “provides you with a broader perspective and a systemic view of the issues and can shine a light

on unexamined assumptions that would otherwise not be visible.” Take an aerial view, and the issues look different. So can possible solutions.

God helped us navigate the wilderness by commanding Moses to place the *Mishkan*, our portable sanctuary, at the heart of every encampment, as if to say, know that in a place of uncertainty, what you stand for – your values – is stable and centered. It is, on some level, that which can never be truly in transition. In our *parsha*, we are given a protocol for moving the *Mishkan*: “When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up...” (Num. 1:51). Rashi there explains: “Whenever they were about to set out on a journey in the wilderness from one station to another, they took the structure apart and carried it to the place where the clouds of glory rested, and there they encamped and erected it.” The terrain may be different, but the core of the nation is always the same.

What core values provide you with stability during times of uncertainty?