

Bamidbar: Flags, Colors, Lights

Bamidbar. The wilderness. The book we start this morning. The moment at which we have arrived, here, in the wilderness. Familiar landmarks have disappeared. We can no longer frequent the places we used to go. We no longer do the things we used to do. Perhaps the wind does not howl at night. Perhaps the sun does not scorch us by day. Perhaps there are not jackals and scorpions to fear. Perhaps no hyena's cry pierces the night's silence. But have no doubt. Like our ancestors before us, we are here, in the wilderness, untethered from our former lives and unsure where we are going and how we will get there.

At the same time, the Torah tells us, that the Israelites were arrayed by their standards, each under the banner of their ancestral home. I picture this like one of those movie scenes from a medieval battleground. Tents as far as the eye can see. Colorful banners waving in the wind.

According to the Beit Aharon, a hasidic rebbe of the 19th c, in a text I learned this week from Jonathan Slater, each banner was the color of the stone of the High Priest's breastplate associated with that tribe. This demonstrated the connection of everything to God, since God poured his white light into creation and as it came down, through the sefirot, the white light was refracted, making the different colors, the different sefirot, the different tribes. God is pure white light but as it comes down, manifesting creation, each sefira, or divine attribute, was a color. Specifically, according to hasidic thought, the world begins with Abraham and just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob each manifested a different quality or sefira, they brought a new color into the world. Ultimately for the Beit Aharon each letter of the Torah is its own color — each of us is a letter — and these letters can be combined in infinite combinations, coloring the world as it were.

This is such a beautiful image. It is hasidism's deep intuition that the world consists of building blocks, that these blocks are fundamentally the same, but when combined they yield the matter of the world. So too the white light, refracted through the spectrum, ultimately becomes each letter, each soul root, each color, which can be combined and recombined, like recombinant genes in infinite ways. We are diverse — like the flags in the wilderness, flying in the breeze — but garbing God as it were, like layers of diaphanous cloth through which God's light pours through. Through each of us shining our own unique light and color, God's glory is manifest in this world.

When I read this, I think about our zoom screens. I think about each of us in our houses and our little lights going on and off, and our faces brightening this screen. I think about when you are in a plane taking off, and you see the twinkling lights of the city below, almost the reverse of the stars above — beacons of human presence and connection.

In a midrash, the angels are described as arrayed around God with their banners at the moment of Sinai. The Israelites, in this text, ask God to make them like angels, and so God gives them banners. This seems to reflect a desire to hold on to God's presence, to have it firmly rooted like a flag in front of us. Similarly, each ot or standard symbolize one's ancestral tribe. Holding the flag is a way to identify with that tribe, to cling, as it were, to one's ancestral roots. And yet we also know that this is not a given in the world we live in — that it is a choice one has to make, regularly, to walk in the ways of the patriarchs, to maintain a connection to Judaism, to tradition, to our past in a world so quickly changing.

In that way, according to Aviva Zornberg, the flags represent longing. Think of them waving in the wind, reaching out — we want to be angels, we want feel God's presence with us, we want to connect to our roots, we want to connect to each other. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we don't. The Sfat Emet, another 19th century hasid, plays with the words degel — flag — and dilug — reverse the last two letters — leap — a longing or absence. We both stand

there with our flags asserting presence and at the same time there is dilug — absence. We don't feel secure in God's presence. We aren't angels. We are unsure often of our own connections to one another and to God, experiencing them as fleeting pulses, like the flags, more than as an ongoing steady presence. Especially now, that dilug is real. We long to connect to one another. We flash our lights, our computer screens, our zoom boxes, our morse code, but the connection is tenuous. It is hard to feel — it is something we have to know deeply and for humans, I think, it is hard to hold on to that knowing. Why do we never tire of hearing the words, "I love you." Why is it not superficial when we say them when we hang up the phone or say goodbye? Because that connection always has to be built and reaffirmed — it is never a line you can hang and know that it will always be there.

So what do we do with all this? There we are — these beautiful lights, manifesting God's glory in the world, each of us unique — and yet also struggling — is God with us right now? are we connected to one another? how does one feel connection in a world so disconnected? how do we transform the world if each of us is so separated from one another?

I would like to offer three thoughts on that question. Use what is useful among them.

First, bitachon. Trust. This is often described as faith, but I am not particularly in love with the word faith, partially because it has Christian overtones, and partially because it implies believing in something that is impossible or faraway and trying to convince oneself that something untrue is true. We believe in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy until we outgrow those beliefs.

Bitachon is closer to emunah, trust. Trust that there is solid ground underneath me. Trust in relationships. Trust in myself to have the resources within me to face what I have to face. Trust in God that however difficult things are, we can walk forward, knowing that the world is good, that we are here for a reason, that we are capable of manifesting goodness.

These feelings are also not always or often easy. And especially in a time like this, trust is shaken. "Esa aynay — I lift my eyes to the heavens, from where does my help come?" Cultivating trust is a spiritual practice — we do it when we meditate and simply experience the solidity and wholeness of our own bodies, the constancy of our breath. We do it when we study Torah and affirm our connection to the tree of life, to our ancestral wisdom, to mayim chayim, the wellspring of Torah that continues to pour through us, still new, still fresh, still sweet. We do it when we pray.

We're humans. We have to say I love you often. We have to affirm God's goodness every day. We have to practice bitachon so that we can in moments like this, continue to feel that there is something to hold on to. This is why I love to say the ma'ariv aravim prayer at night — בּוֹרָא יוֹם וְלַיְלָה God creates day and night, rolling light away from darkness and darkness from light. You make the day pass and bring the night and distinguish between day and night... The rhythm of the Hebrew, its constancy, like my own breath, reminds me of the constancy of the world — sun rises, sun sets — even when so much feels shaky.

Second, continuing with the Beit Aharon text on the theme of the colored lights, he offers some kabalistic theology on yesh — or somethingness and ayin or nothingness. God is generally understood as ayin — no thing — totality. From ayin — nothingness — emanates yesh — everything that exists. Creation ex nihilo. Out of the white light, refracted through the prism comes the world of colors and hues which make up all creation — all people, all cultures, all animals, all plants — each its own color and hue, just like the banners in the desert. The world then, in its diversity, testifies to Divinity in its brokenness and its wholeness.

Now, just as God refracts the white light down to us, from ayin — totality — to — somethingness — differentiation — it is our job to return that light to Him. Through our deeds and actions we can unify creation — join ourselves to one another, heart by heart, and to all that is and reveal that it is in fact all God. We can raise up consciousness, we can raise up the quality of our behavior and we can learn to act more consciously, not just reacting or acting out of habit. When we hold the unity of all existence in our hearts, when we can raise up the fact that we are one with everything that seems separate from us — plants, animals, trees, people far away, even people we hate. When we can see that we are not separate, then we return the yesh to the ayn, separateness and differentiation back to singularity.

I know that's a lot. But just imagine that just as the white light flows down to us and is refracted into colors through all of creation, that we too through the mitzvot, through our actions, have the power to l'taken olam b'malchut shadi ' to recognize God's oneness as it adheres in the world, to see deeply the oneness of all things, and to lift the light back up from colors to pure whiteness. Not only do we have the power. That is what we were created for.

So, first we can have basic trust or bitachon. Then we can act to unify the world, to see past the things that separate and divide, and to bring it back to wholeness.

Before I reach my final point, I want to note that the pull in both directions, toward and away from unity, is very obvious right now. On the one hand, you see people caring for one another. We understand that my fate — my health, my economic wellbeing — is deeply bound up with yours. And so to act justly in this pandemic is to act with that knowledge.

At the same time, we see forces pulling the other way — I should be free to do whatever I want, regardless of others; this is the fault of the Chinese; my need for work or a paycheck might trump your need for life itself. We see this in hoarding toilet paper or buying masks for individual use while hospitals ran low. This is the pull toward separateness and differentiation. It too, in its brokenness, is part of God. Our challenge is to overcome that instinct in ourselves and to help others open to their own light.

So, how do we pull toward unity when we are so separate right now? What can I do in my own little house in my own little way with my little light, my color, my desktop shining out its morse code? Here, the Beit Aharon says something extraordinary. He writes: "Each person must know that that they are unique in the world according to their lights. You and no other person like you has ever been in this world. For if someone like you had already come into the world there would be no need for you. But, in truth, each of us is something new in the world." Each of us is our own color or hue and each of us has the responsibility to fix the middah, or quality connected to our soul, and this he says, will bring messiah.

In other words our job is not just to fix the world by acting justly, and I don't mean that as a small task, but also, in addition, each of us can repair the world by fully living our lives in the ways we were made to be in the world, repairing the unique strengths and weaknesses that each of us is blessed with, that each of us can work on.

In the words of another famous rabbi, don't hide your light under a bushel. Our unique color needs to shine in the world — our dance, our song — and when we fail to do that, we deny the world its wholeness. The world could be whole if everyone manifested their piece of divine light.

So, yes, it would be sweeter to be together. It would be nice to hold hands. It would be lovely to sing together for real. And there is justice work to be done that needs us together — hearts and hands and minds. But we can also, even in our separateness, shine our own light, that

unique light that if you didn't have it, you wouldn't have been born because there would have been no need for you. When each of us rectifies our own unique capacities, when we stop holding ourselves back out of fear and self-judgment, when we embrace the unity of all existence with loving and open hearts, even in our separate places, shining our separate colors, the world can be healed.