

Sermon | Parshat B'midbar
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At the Back of the Line

On Thursday night I had the privilege of being the final speaker for our Men's Club Jews and Brews series. They meet throughout the year at Lakewood Country Club, inviting our clergy to lead a topical conversation with a group of dedicated Men's Club members. I spoke about a serious problem facing the majority of the Jewish world in America today: the lack of a pipeline for future rabbis who would serve America's synagogues. Everyone agrees that there is a problem—enrollment is down in rabbinical schools affiliated with the Reform and Conservative movements, and of those who attend, an increasing number seem to be finding work outside of synagogues. Rabbis can work in a day school, at Hillel on a college campus, serving as a chaplain in a hospital or prison system, just to name a few non-pulpit opportunities. And this has left many synagogues without rabbinic leadership. In 2022, there were nearly 80 Conservative synagogues searching for a rabbi, with only 50 or 60 rabbis searching for a position. There just aren't enough rabbis to serve America's congregations. Everyone agrees that it is a problem.

Where people disagree, however, is about the cause of the problem. *Why* aren't there enough rabbis? One explanation suggests that denominational affiliation is down, so there are fewer younger Jews involved in Jewish life, the pool is just getting smaller. Another explanation is that the best and brightest hear about the realities of being a pulpit rabbi and run the other way. In a sermon last year on this topic, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue said, "None of us went into the rabbinate for board meetings and synagogue politics. We did so because we love Jews and we love Judaism...But then rabbis discover a life of membership

models, of divisive politics on Israel...Rabbis are called on to...deal with congregants who project their personal frustrations with their lives, their faith, or their family onto the rabbi's last sermon or the new melody the cantor introduced." And then there are those who cite the many years of study required to become a rabbi, not to mention the tens of thousands of dollars of student loans and debt one accumulates from those years of study.

So, you could point fingers and suggest that the movements are failing, and it is their fault. You could suggest that synagogues are difficult places to work, so it is their fault. You could suggest that academia is overpriced and restrictive, so it is their fault. In other words, it is very easy to point the finger elsewhere, and suggest that this is someone else's problem to deal with. But that is neither productive nor helpful. Moreover, the problem is most likely the result of an amalgamation of these root causes—it isn't just one thing that is to blame for the situation. Parshat B'midbar has something to teach us about the situation. When faced with a challenge, Parshat B'midbar tells us that it is our obligation to help address it, rather than leave it for the next person to address.

In its description of the arrangement of the Israelite camp, the Torah instructs, “בְּאֶנְשׁוֹ בִּלְפָנֶיךָ יִחַנּוּ וּבִלְפָנֶיךָ יִמָּרְחוּ, As they camp, so shall they march, each in position by their standards.”¹ Remember, this *parsha* describes how the Israelites arranged themselves by tribe in a military square encircling the Tabernacle. So when the Torah says “as they camp, so shall they march,” this implies that the Israelites not only camped in a military square formation, but also marched in this formation. The Talmud Yerushalmi says precisely that in tractate Eiruvim, “How did Israel travel in the desert? One Sage says that they traveled in a square formation, ‘as they camp, so

¹ Numbers 2:17.

they shall march. But another Sage says that they traveled in a straight line.”² This latter opinion is based on a verse later in the Book of Numbers, “The standard of the division of Dan would set out as the rear guard of all the divisions (מֵאַחֲרֵי לְכָל־הַמַּחֲנֵה).”³ If there is a rear guard, then this implies that they marched in a line, one tribe in front of the other.

You might read this *midrash* and ask “Who cares?” Why does it matter whether they marched in a military square formation or in a straight line? Well, if they march in a square, in the same positions that they camp, then their positions are static and unchanging. There is a routine and regularity. For those of you who are regular shul-goers, you understand this. Regulars have their section, their row, perhaps even *their* seat. It is comfortable to know where you are, and where you are supposed to be.

But if the Israelites marched in a straight line, then they were constantly arranging and rearranging themselves. Camping in one formation, but marching in a different one. And if they did march in a line, then someone has to be at the end of that line. According to the verse above, it was the tribe of Dan, the second most populous tribe, which marched at the back of the line. (The first most populous tribe was Judah, and they marched at the front.) And what did Dan do as the rear guard? Dan was מֵאַחֲרֵי לְכָל־הַמַּחֲנֵה, literally “the gatherer for the camps,” they picked up things that were left, they took in those who were lost or weary, they assisted those who needed help the most. The other tribes had already passed by; only Dan was there to help. If they ignored the wanderer, the lost object, the weary, then they would be lost to the vast and empty wilderness forever. Dan had no choice but to help. In the words of Pirkei Avot, בְּמִקְוֵה

² Yerushalmi Eiruv 5:1.

³ Numbers 10:25.

שָׂאִין אֲנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ
yourself.”⁴

That is why it matters how the tribes were arranged, and whether they marched in a line or in a military square. It is much easier to march in the square formation. You have your spot. It’s familiar. It’s comfortable. There are no surprises. You are responsible for yourself and nobody else. But most of us know that life is not so simple. You don’t get to just camp out in one place and stay there forever. Life is not always predictable. At a certain point in time you become responsible for others—parents, children, siblings, or friends. And you look around to see that nobody else is going to help, so it might as well be you. That is the challenge that Parshat B’midbar sets before us: Will you be like Dan? The other tribes are marching forward, assuming that someone else is going to help that wandering individual, that lost soul. But will you be like Dan? Will you step forward and help? Will you be a *מְאַסֵּף לְכָל־הַמַּחֲנֶה*, a gatherer for everyone else, bringing people in and offering your support?

One of the other great challenges that we face in the American Jewish community today is rising antisemitism, coming from both extremes of the political spectrum and even in between. I alone cannot fix this problem. But I am trying to be like Dan and do my part to address it. To that end, I am participating in a training program hosted by JCRC and led by Project Shema, which “is an independent nonprofit organization that trains and supports the Jewish community and allies to understand and address contemporary antisemitism, with an emphasis on how anti-Jewish ideas can emerge in progressive spaces and in discourse around Israel and Palestine.” This brief series of workshops is helping me learn what I need to know to

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:6.

meaningfully engage in dialogue with those who are outside of the Jewish community, especially as it relates to conversations about antisemitism and Israel. No, the training will not single-handedly solve the problem, but this is one way that I am trying to answer the call of Parshat B'midbar to step up as Dan, and address a challenge that is set before me rather than pass it by and assume that someone else will be there to do it.

Returning to where I began, the clergy pipeline problem is not going to be fixed when people pass by it, when they point the finger at the group walking behind them, and assume that they will deal with it. The problem will be solved when everyone steps up and sees themselves as the tribe of Dan, as uniquely positioned and ultimately responsible. Do not expect that someone else will intervene and solve the world's problems for you. Be like Dan and see it as your personal obligation to help. Shabbat shalom.