

“Get Back To Where You Once Belonged”

Dvar Torah for *Parashat B’midbar*

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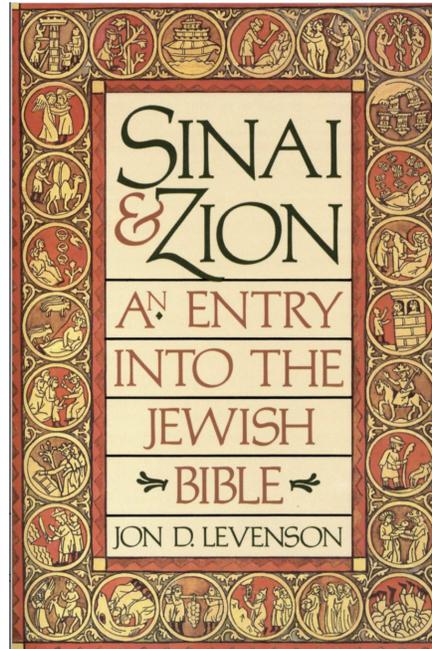
May 23, 2020

Just yesterday was **Yom Yerushalayim**, which commemorates the unification of Jerusalem in 1967. That was special. Prior to that, only a slice of Jerusalem, not including the Old City, was fully accessible to Jews. Once Israeli soldiers liberated the City, we Jews could finally go all over the city -- a city that had been inaccessible since 1948, and had lacked Jewish sovereignty for many years prior to that.

For those of us who’ve been there, for those of us who realize its significance in Jewish history and tradition, it’s special to think of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a city of hills, such as the Mount of Olives or Mount Scopus. Perhaps its most famous is **Mount Zion**, which is considered a synonym of Jerusalem in Jewish texts. But Jerusalem, with its hills, isn’t the only mountain that is special in our tradition. There are other mountains in Israel (such as Mount Carmel, Mount Hermon) and there is also a very special mountain -- special to Jews, that is -- not in Israel at all, **Mount Sinai**.

I have a book by Professor Jon Levenson called, **Sinai and Zion**.



The explanation for the title is this: in Jewish thought we think about being rooted in Zion; but we also think a lot about being displaced, and wandering in the Sinai. After all, how long were we in Sinai? Well, **40 years**. But that doesn't tell the whole story: Prior to our wandering in the Sinai, we had been living in Egypt for **400 years**. And even after we got to the Land of Israel, we weren't able to stay there for all time, for our nation was conquered in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. Yes, we were able to return before too long -- it was only according to tradition, **70 years**. And we lived in the Land, in a small region surrounding Jerusalem, as a Persian community until the Persians were conquered by the Greeks. And then our community became a Greek community, until the Romans conquered the Greeks and it became a Roman community. But then, in 70 CE, it was conquered again, the Second Temple was destroyed, and within a century, Jews were exiled from the city of Jerusalem and all hope of restoring our national identity in Israel in the near future became very feeble.

We preserved our hope that one day we would return, but it didn't take **40** years, it didn't take **70** years, it didn't take **400** years: it took almost **2,000** years before we returned. So recall: **40** years in the wilderness of Sinai; **70** years in Babylonia; **400** years in Egypt; and **2,000** years all over the world until we finally returned. That's a lot of time living outside of Zion.

And even since 1948, Jews have continued to live all over the world. Not just in Israel.

When Israel was established, a key sentence was put at the very beginning of the Declaration of Independence:

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

Now, a Declaration of Independence is a political document. Its authors could be forgiven for its emphasis on Zion over Sinai. But we shouldn't ignore the considerable impact of **life in exile** on our consciousness and on Jewish tradition.

Which brings me to this period we're in now: our enforced isolation, our quarantining. We're **in** our homes, but we don't feel completely **at** home, because there are restrictions on where we can go, with whom we can be, and what we have to wear when we go out.



We don't know how long this will continue. The Governor recently began a four phase program of opening up the Commonwealth. He said: Religious institutions can open, right away. He also said that religious institutions were urged to continue to meet virtually. I'm glad he said that, because it isn't clear to me why it's safer to gather in close quarters as a religious community than for other reasons. In fact, it's probably *more* dangerous to gather as a religious community. Why? Well, as a friend and colleague of mine on the Needham Clergy Association put it the other day: What can't we do virtually that we really want to do? We can't **sing** and we can't **hug** each other. What can't we do in person *even if we open up our church*? We won't be able to **sing** and we won't be able to **hug** each other. Everything else we can do just as well virtually without risking anyone's life -- especially the most vulnerable among us.

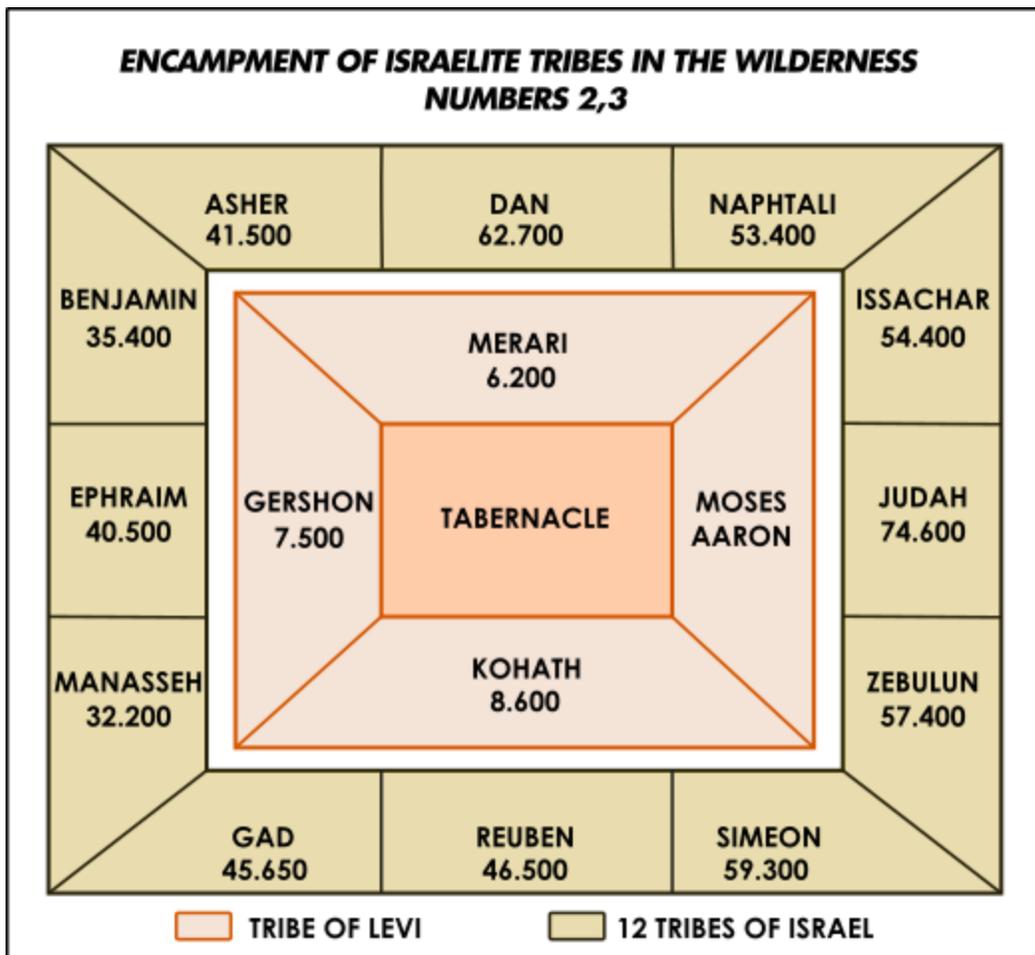
And so, we won't be opening up our building right away. None of the faith communities in town are doing that. One church has a target date of January 1, 2021; another church is hoping to open in the fall -- though they recognize that the fall may be precisely the time when it may be prudent to go virtual again. Everyone is united in prioritizing concern for **life, health** and **well-being**, over everything else.

But it's frustrating, isn't it? We don't know when we'll be going back. We don't know when we'll get there.

What can we learn from the Jewish experience in the Wilderness that might help us at this time?

The answer is, **a lot**, and it's all in Sefer Bemidbar, the Book of Numbers, which we began this week.

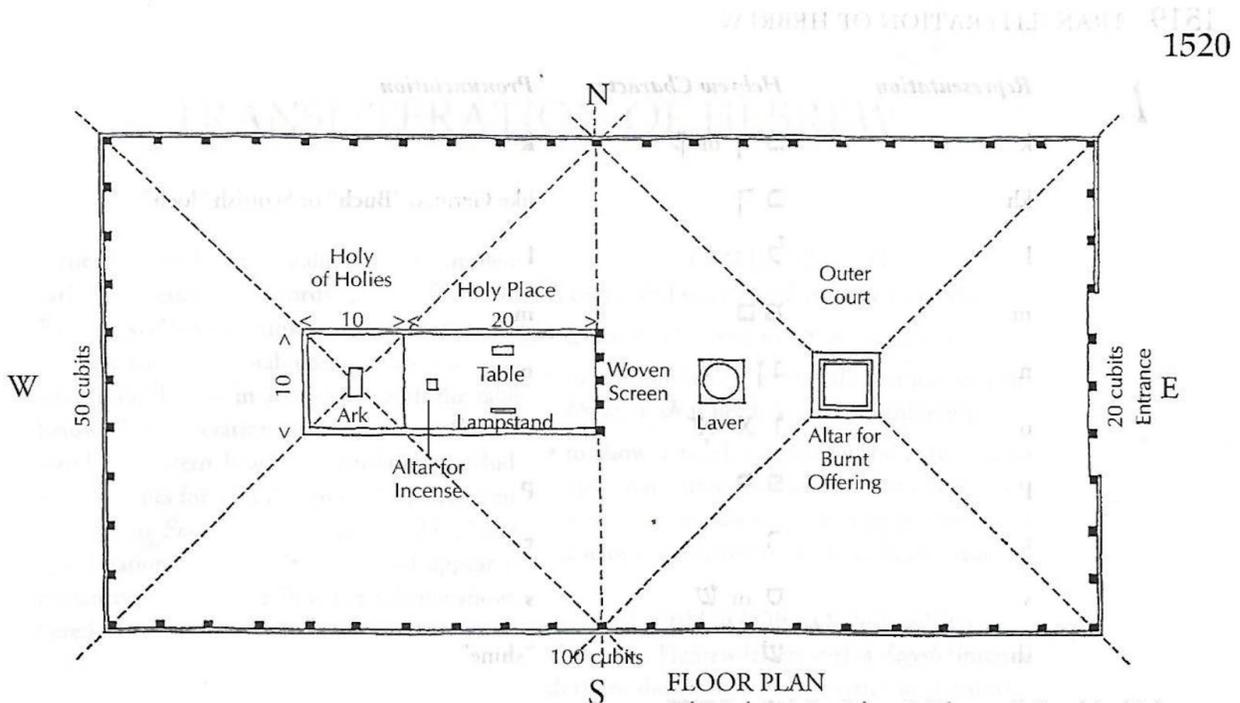
First, everyone had their place. Take a look at this diagram that describes what every tribe's role and place was:



As you can see, **everyone has a place**. That's key. Even though we're not in our building, even though we're closer to Mount Sinai than to Mount Zion, we can still work together cooperatively and collaboratively.

Second, even though the people were divided into twelve tribes, they worked together harmoniously. At least, when they did, things went well. When they didn't, things didn't go well. We have to look at ourselves as one community. We may not agree on every issue, but we need to look at one another with respect and affection. Only if we consider ourselves fellow members of one clan can we hope to do well during this time.

Third, not only did the Israelites have an intricate arrangement in the Wilderness, but there was something definite and fixed, right smack in the middle. What was that? The Tabernacle. And what was in the exact center of the Tabernacle? The Entrance to the Holy of Holies.



(copied from the Etz Hayim Humash, page 1520)

And what was in the exact center of the Holy of Holies? The Ark of the Covenant. And what was in the Ark? Well, according to tradition, either the **Ten Commandments** or the **Torah** (or both).

Those same **Ten Commandments** are in our ark, too. They're not only in our physical ark; they're in our spiritual ark. The **Ten Commandments** and **the Torah as a whole** are at the center of our consciousness. At least, they should be. Because that is what gives us strength: the core values, the core ethical obligations, the core practices of our tradition.

The Torah was at the center of the Israelite camp, and the Torah is at the center of our camp. If it remains that way, we'll be fine, however long it takes **to get back to where we once belonged.**

The Torah was given to us to live by. That's why it's at the center. We must keep at our center what is most important, most special, most holy.

The Children of Israel eventually made it into the land. It may have taken them longer than they anticipated. It may have been frustrating. But they finally made it. We will too. So long as we keep the Torah at the center of our consciousness, I have no doubt that we will.

Shabbat shalom!