

Three Lessons from the Wilderness Generation
Parashat Bemidbar
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Today's *parashah* begins a new book of the Torah and also introduces a theme that has previously been absent: community organization.

Genesis, we could say, is about individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and their families; *Exodus* is about the Children of Israel becoming a people; *Leviticus* is about how that people worship God, and how individuals within the group should relate to one another. Only in *Numbers* do we get exposed to the notion of the Jewish people as a mass of perhaps *distantly related people*, who nonetheless have obligations toward one another, who have to work with one another to pursue common goals. This is the book in which, according to Arnold Eisen, we get introduced to *politics*.

Now, you might not think so, judging from today's *parashah*. Today's *parashah* is very static. All we see is the arrangement and the numbering of the tribes and the clans. And yet, even within this *parashah*, we see, it seems to me, political principles that are as valuable to us today as they ever were to our ancestors thousands of years ago. Let me share with you three such principles, three take-away lessons for the Jewish community from *Parashat B'midbar*.

First, in this week's *parashah*, everyone has a place. Everyone has a role. True, in *B'midbar*, we see a highly structured, highly regimented arrangement: This tribe here; that tribe there. To us, that may seem arbitrary. Even unfair. And yet, when you compare it to what existed before, it represents progress. In *Genesis*, we did see the brothers line up in order of age. In *Exodus*, we did see the Levites distinguished from the other tribes; but here, each and every tribe has its place. So too, that seems to be the message.

The same is true today. No Jewish community should be elitist. Every community should think of itself as a microcosm of the entire Jewish people. And therefore, there should be an effort to help everyone within the community find their place within that microcosm.



The second message from our *parashah* is, that what's most precious is at the center.

In the days of the Wilderness wandering, that was the Ark of the Covenant. Today, what is it? What's most precious to us as Jews? Our own security? Our own identity?

Today, just as it was in the past, it's the **Torah**. Without Torah, who are we? We symbolize this commitment through the architectural arrangement we employ within each and every shul. When we take out the Torah, we bring it to the **center**, where we read it. (Interestingly, why don't we *keep* the Torah in the center? The reason is that we are displaced. We are out of Zion, and so we keep it in an ark that orients us—points us—to Zion.)

Unless we are mission-driven, we will drift. A shul is not a country club. It's not a social club. It's a *kehillat kodesh*—a community devoted to the holy or the sacred—and the source of our knowledge, wisdom and moral insight is the Torah.

What are rabbis told when they graduate? “Remember, it's the Torah that gives you legitimacy and authority; be loyal to it.”

The same applies, of course, to congregants. To all of us there's a lesson here: to *be* a Jew may be an accident of birth, but to *behave* as a Jew requires commitment to something beyond one's self. Judaism calls on us to behave not the way we might *want* to behave, but the way we *should* behave. Putting the Torah at the center symbolizes that commitment.

Third, “*ka-asher yachanu, kein yisau*”: “As they camped, so too did they travel.” There are many centrifugal forces in the world today. There always have been. In the modern world in particular, assimilation beckons. A generation ago, the pull was to be more American than our neighbors, to be accepted so we could advance economically, socially, politically.

Now, we Jews have made it, but the pulls continue. Many Jews continue to believe that it's a *mitzvah*, as it were, to socialize whenever our neighbors do—even if that happens to be on a Friday night or a Shabbat morning. Whether we're talking about high school dances on Friday night or soccer or other sports on Shabbat morning, each one of these challenges raises the question, or **should** raise the question, for each of us: *Am I or am I not committed to the goals of the Jewish people?* If not, then it doesn't matter what I do. If I am, then it does.

So, in conclusion, let's remember these three lessons from the Wilderness generation. Let's remember that **first**, each of us has a place, a role to play. **Second**, we've got to keep the Torah, representing our most precious values, at the center. **Third**, this applies even at a time of great change. Even at a time like today.

Shabbat shalom!