



A Sermon by  
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BeHa' alothecha: A GPS for the Way  
June 13, 2009

Difficult as it may be to believe, there was a time when there was no such thing as GPS, Global Positioning Service. That's right. Back in the old days, people had to use MapQuest to figure out how to get where they were going.

And in the early days, before there was MapQuest, there were Triptiks – but only for those who belonged to AAA. If you did not belong, or know someone who did, or have an uncle who belonged, you had to be really resourceful, you had to use maps.

(By the way, I think I may have stumbled onto a new fundraiser for our shul. Can you imagine – if our Fundraising committee would get a copy of my sermon in advance, and then go out and seek sponsors for product placement. Just a thought.)

As any man will tell you, all of these resources, GPS, triptiks, and so on were made available to us for one reason, and one reason only -- so we would not have to pull over and ask for directions.

To this day, there are those who assert with absolute certainty that the true reason the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years was because Moses refused to stop and ask for directions.

We find in this week's parasha that the people of Israel are in the wilderness and they have an unusual form of GPS for their day and age. The Israelites never knew the duration of their sojourn in any one place, yet they all knew how and when to leave, to break camp and to proceed. The text goes out of its way to let us know that the movements are arbitrary and unpredictable. Sometimes they remained encamped for a day, sometimes for a couple of days. It could be for a month, or even a year.

How did they know when to move en masse?

We read of the cloud that covers the Tabernacle by day and appears as fire by night. Just as darkness hides the cloud at night, the sun presumably masks the fire by its light each day. And when the cloud is lifted, during daylight hours, they know it is time to move on, and when it is stationary, they remain settled.

Is there anything we can learn from this?

It is interesting to note that the image is a fire by night and a cloud by day, pointing out that the human vision of God may be inconsistent and changing. The circumstances alter what we are able to see. Yet despite this, God is one and unchanging. It is our perception that may vary. Regardless of the specific nature of the vision, the Divine Presence is constant. It is a real presence, something that is palpable to the Israelites. It

is dependable and accessible, so much so that it can guide their collective journey through the Wilderness to the Promised Land.

Earlier this week I had the privilege of being invited to join a small group of rabbis to an overnight colloquium with Dr. Arnie Eisen, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. We talked about issues pertaining to leadership and direction of the American Jewish community for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In certain respects, the image of the cloud guiding our people is a metaphor, for we too, seek guidance, and wish we had something as clear as a cloud to direct our movements. In commenting on this week's parsha Chancellor Eisen has written:

"We inhabit a sort of Wilderness but do not march aimlessly through it because we have the Torah—not only the Five Books but a long tradition of authorized interpretation that makes the lessons first taught by Moses applicable in changing circumstances. We do not have *one* Jewish view of anything, but we do have a remarkable degree of consensus on some matters. We do not have priests or prophets wielding unmistakable symbols of divine favor, but we do have religious leaders and educators who possess authority based on learning, skill, and personal gifts. Among the latter, for professional and lay leaders in our community alike, integrity and kindness still count for a great deal. So does wisdom that is able to discern where the community stands and where it should be going, in keeping with our Torah. At times of crisis, this ability is perhaps valued most of all."

In other words, like those who came before us, we seek guidance, answers and direction. Unlike our ancestors, however, we do not have a cloud to guide us. Rather it is through the study of Torah and of our sources that we discern God in our day and age.

We are told that "according to the word of God they shall encamp, and according to the word of God they shall travel." We do not live with such certainty. The Chofetz Chayim, a sage of the past century derives from this the important notion that when a person travels, many tests and challenges may arise and confront the individual. He teaches that a person must make a special effort to observe Torah values regardless of where one is, whether at rest or when travelling. In both instances, citing our text he notes, the people act "according to the word of God."

Finally, as we all know, it is easy to be nostalgic, especially about the past. Yet the narrative of the seemingly tremendous faith of the Israelites who are experiencing God directly is followed by a story of rebellion, of the people complaining and challenging the leadership of Moses. It is as if the Torah wants us to understand that even when things were good, when God was visible and an active, ongoing force in the lives of the people, there were doubts and uncertainty. The Torah wants us to understand, belief is never easy. I think of the bumper stickers that used to be ubiquitous, "God is my co-pilot." It would be more accurate to say that the Torah can serve as the ultimate GPS system, and offer us guidance for the way.

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