

Behalotcha 5780, Rabbi James Proops

As I learnt through the *parasha* this week, I couldn't help but be drawn to one particular narrative in this week's reading and how it relates to all our lives in recent months, both as individuals and as a wider community.

As we continue through the *Sefer of Bamidbar*, we learn how *Bnei Yisrael* traversed through the *Midbar*. The *parasha* recounts how they were guided by a cloud which would rest above the *Mishkan*. Upon seeing the cloud move, they would break down their encampment and follow wherever the cloud would lead them.

עַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־פִּי ה' יַחֲנוּ “According to the word of Hashem would the Children of Israel journey and according to the word of Hashem would then encamp”. They would travel for as long as the cloud would move

וּבַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכֹּן־שָׁם הָעֶנָן יַחֲנוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “and in the place where the cloud would rest, there the Children of Israel would encamp”.

We learn from the subsequent verses, that there was no indication of how long they would be camped in one location. Sometimes the cloud would stay for a year or even more and other times they would have to pack up and move after just one night.

The Seforno in his commentary on the *parasha* explains that in its description of the nature of how and where they encamped, the Torah is teaching us the incredible level of trust that *Bnei Yisrael* exhibited, only journeying and camping according to the word of God. He writes,

“They followed the cloud faithfully and unquestioningly, halting wherever it stopped even if the place was desolate and dangerous... And even if they were content and happy in a particular location, they left as soon as the cloud moved on. The period of time was irrelevant... Such was the total commitment of that generation to the dictates and direction of God”.

To live one's life with the level of trust in Hashem exhibited by the way *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed and encamped, is a formidable challenge. So often we bemoan and despair at the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not realizing that we are merely at an encampment along our journey through our own *midbar*. At other times in our life we feel we are at the 'perfect place', happy, inspired and productive, yet there comes a time when we must move on from that encampment on to the next location in our journey. Rav Shlomo Wolbe points out in his *Shiurei Chumash* that sometimes we can sense that Hashem has brought us somewhere that seems to be of obvious benefit to our lives and conversely we might feel that we have arrived at a situation that seems to be to our detriment. However, he explains that we should know that if Hashem has put us in a specific situation, then that is where *we are meant to be* at that moment.

For all of us, life is a journey with various untold stops along the way. We can either fight against the places in which we find ourselves, always looking for a more pleasant and convenient encampment. Or we can recognize that our compass is set by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, who with Divine Wisdom guides us to where we need to be.

We can't begin to comprehend why our guiding cloud had to bring us, in the year 5780, to the turmoil ridden, distressful and painful location that we have found ourselves in the past few months. The beginning of March was a joyful and happy time, as we prepared our Mishloach Manot, made plans for Purim Seudah and even began to think about Pesach. It was then that things started to change. The cloud started to move, so to speak, and we had to journey to a very different time and place. We would have all been happy and content for things to have stayed as they were, but that was not to be. Yet we must take great inspiration from Bnei Yisrael who lived their lives “עַל־פִּי ה' - according to the word of Hashem”, accepting graciously that they could not necessarily stay in one encampment, even if it seemed to them like a wonderful place to be at that time.

This week however, it has seemed that maybe the cloud is readying to lead us on to the next location on our journey. As we began to hold minyanim at shul, although different from ever before and with many people missing, the glimmer of light could be felt by all who were present. To be able to say the holy words of the *kedusha*, to answer *Barachu* and to hear *Kriyat HaTorah* from a *Sefer Torah*, we could feel the next phase of our journey beginning. עַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִחַגְּרוּ journey”.

For me personally it marked the opportunity to say *Kaddish* for my late father for the very first time. Having not been able to attend the *levaya* in London and sit *shiva* in the regular way together with my family was painful and extremely difficult. Yet to be prevented from saying *Kaddish*, the quintessential testimony of love and respect that a child can pay to their departed parent, seemed unfair, unjust and incomprehensible. I was forced to take a step back and find elsewhere to direct my attention and other ways to show honor to my dad. One of the ways in which I did this was to learn more about the *Kaddish* prayer as well as explore the other areas in which one can benefit the *neshama* of the deceased. I was able to reaffirm my understanding that the basis of saying *Kaddish* is to proclaim the greatness of God and verbally bring *Kiddush Hashem* into the world. When this is said ‘*liulei nishmat*’ the deceased, the *Kiddush Hashem* done in their name brings great merit to their *neshama* and I prepared myself for when the opportunity would come.

And so it was, that I stood on Wednesday morning after two and half months of waiting, 8ft away from the nearest person, mask over my nose and mouth, standing in the YICC parking lot with the noise of traffic in the air, knowing that a number of inspirational and dedicated individuals were watching along on Zoom, themselves unable yet to join in our strange looking minyan, that I was able to recite *Kaddish*. We stood together but apart and proclaimed “יְהִי שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ. לְעֵלָם וְלְעֵלְמֵי עֲלְמֵיָא May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity”. Despite the turmoil. Despite the pain. Despite the uncomfortable masks and the heat of the sun. Despite facing the unknown. What an incredible *Kiddush Hashem*.

What a demonstration of people striving to live their lives along the dictates of
עַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִחַנּוּ “According to the word of Hashem
would the Children of Israel journey and according to the word of Hashem would
then encamp”.

We don't know what the next phase in our journey will look like or how long it
will last for, yet together we must accept it with emunah, with the faith that we are
being guided by Hashem to where we need to be and just like Bnei Yisrael in the
midbar we too will reach our destination.