

My parsha, Beha'alotcha, takes place in the desert of Egypt, right after Moses has freed the Jews. As they are wandering through the wilderness, God is described as guiding the Jews to Israel by hovering over the tabernacle as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When this pillar moved, it was their sign to make camp and break camp.

The Jews are constantly complaining to Moses about their diet. In Egypt, they were served food but now they had to get it themselves. They weren't appreciating what Moses had done for them by freeing them from slavery. Moses cries to God that he can't lead these people by himself, so God tells Moses to gather 70 elders to help him.

At one of the camps, Miriam and Aaron speak ill of the Cushite (or foreigner) woman that Moses has married. They also declare themselves to be prophets of equal stature as Moses. God tells them that Moses is the only prophet to whom God speaks to plainly, rather than through dreams or visions, and strikes Miriam with leprosy as punishment. Aaron begs Moses to intercede with God on behalf of Miriam. Moses does so, and God agrees to limit Miriam's punishment to only seven days. Once Miriam gets better, they break camp and move to Paran.

In this portion, God was very clear when directing the Jews - telling them where to go, when to go there, what they were supposed to do, and helping them out of tough situations.

For example, whenever Moses had a problem like the Jews complaining too much, he was able to directly ask God what to do and would receive a direct answer.

In the modern world, we don't have that kind of clarity. God doesn't talk to people, doesn't give signs, and people aren't guided by God directly.

So how are people guided? How do they find their path? How do they know right from wrong? I think that people are guided differently though out their life.

As a child, you're guided by your parents and teachers and know that they'll correct you when you make a mistake.

As an adolescent, you start to make more of your own decisions but with advice from friends and a larger community of adults and you become more and more responsible for your own actions.

And as an adult, your decisions and mistakes are your own and the path isn't always clear.

Or, at least that's what I've been told

In my portion, God acted sort of like a traffic light by being

very clear and direct about where the Jews were supposed to go and what they were supposed to do. Now, people don't get traffic lights. They aren't always sure what other people want of them. They have to interpret things on their own. No supreme being tells you, "*This is what you have to do in your life. This is how you do it. This is what you can do. This is what you can't do.*"

No one's life is that clear. So then, why does it say in the torah that God was that clear? What if God wasn't this clear back then and the Jewish people had to find their way to Israel on their own? According to the torah, God solved most of the Jews' problems. God gave them food and water, told them where to go, and basically acted as their helicopter parent.

But even though we don't have that kind of clarity, we still have to find a way to move forward as a community. Without a pillar of cloud or fire, we still have to know when to "break camp."

The Jewish people as described in the portion had some conflicts but it was mostly complaints and badmouthing other people. Maybe the simplicity of solving these problems was because they were all from the same cultural group and had similar beliefs on what was wrong and what was right. Now, lots of people from different religions and cultures live together and lots of them have different ideas of what is wrong and what is right.

There are many examples of this in the world today. For example, the issue of gun control.

Some people believe that everyone has the right to own a gun and that right should never be taken away, while others believe that people shouldn't own a gun at all, or at least gun owners should be strictly regulated. Both groups of people believe that what they're fighting for is the right thing to do. They both think they're right. And there are many more examples of issues like this all over the world.

So I ask you today, how do we know what the right thing to do is? How are we guided as individuals in a larger community? How do we find our way when the path isn't always clear?