

Torah Thoughts Pekudei

5779:

How do we know where to go?

As the book of Exodus/Shemot ends this week, and we reach the conclusion of the Torah's instructions about the construction of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, we learn something important about direction. From this moment forward, the people will know where God leads them by the presence of two miraculous signs: the pillar of cloud that hovers above the *mishkan* during the day and the pillar of fire at night. With the space for meeting God now complete, the divine presence represented by those pillars becomes a constant feature of daily life. When the pillars move, the Israelites move; when they remain stationary, so did the people.

The cloud and fire show the way forward; when the nation at last arrives in the Promised Land, the need for them as a navigational device ends. But symbolically, the people would continue to need a kind of spiritual GPS, down to our own time. Once we arrived in the land, the question of 'where do we go from here' shifts from a geographic quest to a moral one. Without the constant presence of God clearly visible, how can we know what direction is the proper one?

God, of course, anticipates this. Leaving Sinai, we learn that the place we experienced God was sacred only because of that meeting. Receiving manna during the wilderness years was a sign of God's constant care in the absence of fertile farmland; arriving in the land the manna stops and the farming begins. And so too with the pillars of cloud and fire: God led the people to their destination, and when they arrive, it is not the miraculous that will teach them where to go but the sacred words that they received at Sinai. As life shifts from wandering to settled existence, Torah is the map for their, and our, belief and behavior. Rather than rely on miraculous signs, we bind our destinies to the values, the rituals and the behaviors that God has shown us. The mitzvot are our cloud and fire, the signs that guide us day and night whenever we are in a spiritual wilderness.