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This has been a tragic, traumatic week for the land of Israel, and for its inhabitants--for all its inhabitants.

We are angry.

We are scared.

We are confused.

We are sad.

It's on my mind, on our minds, weighing on us.

Among the troubles: more than two thousand rockets have been fired from Gaza, with most landing in Israel. The rockets have been fired at civilians, at population centers. Eight Israelis, including one soldier, have been killed, dozens injured, and thousands, perhaps millions, have raced for cover in bomb shelters.

Israel has responded with more than 150 strikes in Gaza, killing about 75 Hamas militants and 45 civilians, and wounding perhaps a thousand people. Jewish mobs have attacked Israeli Arabs. Israeli Arab mobs have attacked Jews.

My heart is heavy; our collective soul is suffering.

This morning, we read the following verses:

במדבר פרק ב, א-ב

(א) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: (ב) אִישׁ עַל דְּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶת לְבַיִת אָבֹתָם יַחֲנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִנְּגֹד סָבִיב לְאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יַחֲנוּ:

Numbers 2:1-2

And God spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: Each by their flag, according to the insignias of their ancestors' houses, shall the children of Israel camp, at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting shall they camp.

Each tribe was supposed to camp, under their flag and tribal insignias, around the Meeting.

I want to offer three readings of this verse through the lens of the midrash on Numbers, Bamidbar Rabbah, that remind me of why this conflict is so hard.

First, the midrash begins by connecting this verse to a verse from Psalm 20 (v.6):

נִרְנְנָה אֲנִי וְיִשְׁוּעֶתְךָ וּבְשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִדְגַל יְמֵלֵךְ יְהוָה כָּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶיךָ:

May we sing for joy at your salvation, and raise our flag in the name of our God.

We raise flags in the name of God. And the midrash adds that God incorporated God's name into our names - the tribes get a ה and a י, making the tribal names into "Ha-ShimonEE—The Shimonites, for example, and yud and hay together form Yah, one of God's names. So God has put God's name in our names. The midrash also adds that God likes our banners better than those of other nations. (Numbers Rabbah 2:3).

The message we get very quickly is that we are superior, that God loves us, our names, and our flags, more than other nations. Jews for a long time have had this sense, and it has justified some of the things for which we, for which I, am less proud.

And this ideology, this faith, is not only Jewish. We have been and are still the targets, and victims, of people who believe God loves them and their flag more than anyone else.

A second interpretation starts with a question. Why does the phrase add the seemingly superfluous detail, “according to the insignias of *their ancestors’ houses*?” The midrash tells that Moses was worried that the tribes wouldn’t know exactly where to camp, that they’d want the same sections of the camp, and that they’d be competing for the same space. But the midrash tells us that God tells Moses that there was a time in the past when each tribe knew where their place was--back when they were carrying Jacob’s casket. And that’s what this phrase, according to their ancestors’ houses, means--it’s meant to remind the tribes of where their spot had been in the past, and where it will be now.

The midrash understands conflict over land, over space, over place. I’ll add that it’s easy if everyone used to have a spot and can fit back into that old spot. But Palestinians returning to their homes throughout the state of Israel isn’t simple, or realistic. And Israeli Jews returning to their pre-1948 homes in East Jerusalem, which is populated now by Palestinians, isn’t simple either. But we all have the sense of space that used to be ours, and that we want, that we want back.

Third, the verse says that the tribes are to camp at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting. The midrash explains that this means within 2,000 amot, or cubits. A cubit is from the bottom of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger--about 18 inches. Times 2,000, divided by 12--it winds up being within 3000 feet--1,000 yards, or a little more than half a mile in any direction.

It’s not a huge area, and everyone wants to be proximate, close, to the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, the source of holiness. Sound familiar? Israel is not a big place, and people want to be there, and to be close to the holy places.

We all want our space--enough of it--where we think it used to be, where our ancestors were. We want to be close to the holy places. And we believe God wants this for us.

I pray that we can find a solution, some day.

May the one who makes peace in the heavens make peace over the Jews and Arabs, the Israelis and Palestinians, and over the entire land of Israel. And let us all say, Amen.