

**In the Middle**  
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We like to finish things. There is something satisfying about putting the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle, and I know I have trouble leaving things half-done. And yet, both in our Torah portion this Shabbat and in our lives, we seem to spend a lot of time in the middle, muddling through.

At the beginning of the book of Numbers, the Israelites conduct a census. I wonder if part of what might have been satisfying about the census was that it was a task with a beginning and an end. Even the ordering of the camp might provide satisfaction in the face of the vastness of the wilderness and the people's anxiety about the future.

I think this year we can relate to the Israelites in the wilderness in a special way, having also experienced an undefined time where some of the normal structures of our life disappeared and we weren't quite sure of the timeline for reaching the end of this particular journey. "Are we there yet?", the Israelites seem to ask Moses over and over in the book of Numbers, as we too have wondered, as things improve but still contain aspects of risk.

Personally, I am feeling very much in a middle space, having retired at the end of December, but only now on the verge of leaving town for a period of time. The disarray in my home—with some furniture left for the renters, some given to

Shifrah and others, and boxes everywhere—is an outward symbol of the challenge of the middle space.

From our congregation as well, I hear the discomfort in this sense of being neither here nor there. I wonder if many are like myself, people who like to finish the things that we have started. Perhaps it's some of our engineers who like to do things, solve problems, and get on with it. Yet here we are in the interim.

Tonight we will count the 49<sup>th</sup> day of the Omer, and on Sunday night we will celebrate Shavuot. It feels in some way like the culmination, the end point, with the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and the establishment of the covenant between the people and God. It is certainly a high point in Jewish history, but is it a finish line? I'd like to suggest that it is not, and try and explain why not.

I don't think it's a coincidence that our calendar is set up so that we always read the first Torah portion in Bamidbar (In the Desert) on the Shabbat before Shavuot, thus always juxtaposing the wanderings and Mount Sinai.

It's like the Dayenu we sing on Passover. *Ilu natan lanu et haTorah* is an important verse, but the giving of the Torah is not the final line in the song.

Similarly, we think of the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy, with the Israelites still on the far side of the Jordan and with Moses dying without entering the Promised Land. And if we think it's the physical entering of the land that is the goalpost, then consider what we sing at the end of the seder. Though we have re-entered the land of Israel and established a modern state, even in Israel we still

sing *LeShanah Habaah Beyerushalayim*, next year in Jerusalem, recognizing the incompleteness—even the tenuousness—of what we have attained so far. It means next year in a Jerusalem at peace, in a more perfected world.

Though worshipping God in the wilderness was set out by Moses in his initial words to Pharaoh as his goal, coming to Mount Sinai is more of a way station than a finish line. The words we use to describe Sinai, *matan Torah*, are not past perfect, but refer to a continuous process, the giving of the Torah. It is not like a physical object, a present that we receive once and for all, but rather something we continue to receive throughout our lives as we study, mature, reflect, and revisit. Rather than being the destination, Sinai, the Torah, is something meant to inform the journey.

One closing word about interim spaces. Open-endedness can feel to some of us like a curse, with its lack of clarity or sense of accomplishment, but perhaps we are being pushed to recognize that all of life is in the middle.

It is natural to say to ourselves, “Once things settle down, once it is normal again, once we attain whatever it is we are aiming for, then we will do all the things we intend.” But the Torah is telling us that we never reach that settled point and remain always in the middle; what we do while waiting matters more. Perhaps that is why our tradition teaches (Pirke Avot 2:5): “Hillel says: don’t say, ‘At the right time I will study,’ for it will never be the right time.”

Don't say when things are more normal, when I unpack, when we arrive at our destination, at the Promised Land. Instead, we know that "*zeh hayom asah Adonai*," this day too is one that God made. May we make of it all that we can.