

Parashat B'midbar 5780

Shabbat Shalom! This Shabbat we begin the fourth book of the Torah called “*B'midbar*” (not *Bamidbar* as it is too often erroneously written) in Hebrew and “Numbers” in English. *B'midbar* means “in the wilderness,” the full expression being “in the wilderness of Sinai,” “*b'midbar Sinai*.” This book picks up from where the book of Exodus leaves off with the Israelites having left Egypt, received the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and continuing their journey to the Promised Land of Israel.

This first *parasha* essentially takes a census of the men of the tribes of Israel of the age of twenty and up who can be counted on to constitute the army upon entering the Promised Land. Another part of the portion describes how the various tribes are to be encamped surrounding the Tabernacle during their sojourn throughout the wilderness of Sinai.

During this journey which altogether took about forty years, the generation that left slavery in Egypt will die off in the wilderness and only the generation born in the wilderness, a generation that did not know slavery first-hand, would enter the land of Israel. There are two exceptions to this: Joshua and Caleb who were the only two spies (out of twelve – one from each tribe) who spied out the land of Israel and came back with positive reports that the Israelites could conquer the land. Joshua, of course, succeeds Moses as the leader and takes the people across the Jordan River to fulfill their destiny as a nation.

This brings me to a theme that's quite relevant to every generation including our own generations. The generation that entered the land of Israel began a totally new chapter in the history of our people. Though they represent a return to the land of our ancestors, when the patriarchs and matriarchs lived in the land of Israel, they were a very small group of people living as a small minority in the land. Now they were going to be the majority and controlling the land. This is a huge difference. In addition, everything that constituted the “secular” history and sacred history of our people had not been experienced by the generation entering the land. It was all tradition to them, even if they heard about it from their own parents.

Every generation has this very same experience. Jews of my age group grew up with the state of Israel always in existence. I'm old enough to remember well, however, the Six-Day War in June of 1967 and the fear for Israel's survival that preceded it. I remember listening to the

radio everyday as we would hear of Egypt's blockade of the Port of Akaba (Eilat) that severely affected Israel's commerce. The news preceding the outbreak of war on June 5th of that year included reports of the huge build-up of the Egyptian and Syrian armies on their borders with Israel. There was enormous anxiety in the Jewish community concerning what would happen. Also, during the first days of the Six-Day War there were reports coming from Egyptian and Syrian propaganda outlets claiming great victories by their armies, while in fact they were being completely routed. People who have grown up many years later have only known Israel as having conquered the West Bank, the Golan, etc. They don't know the insecurity of worrying that Israel may someday cease to exist or remember a time before there was a Jewish state. This is a parallel experience to the generation that crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land.

So how will this new generation that would live as a free sovereign people in their own land relate to the traditions that preceded them? That is always the question. Ultimately, the Jewish tradition and Judaism belongs to the people who are committed to it. None of us owns it. We also have a choice as to how we respect other versions of Judaism different from our own. Will we be tolerant or intolerant? Most of all, will we educate ourselves in the traditions and writings of our long history and do our best to understand them and therefore make them our own as much as possible? Or will we ignore them - or something in between?

We cannot be oblivious to the fact that every generation is living under circumstances different from the generations that preceded it. However, the wisdom accumulated over thousands of years, in my opinion, has an enormous amount to offer us in terms of values to live by and ways of finding meaning in life.

The wilderness of Sinai is a transformational place, a place between Egypt and Israel, between slavery and freedom, past and future. According to our sacred history, that is where we truly became a people. Throughout our thousands of years of history, we have always gone back to our sources and found ways to make them relevant to our own days and to be nourished by them. The more we know them, the more they can nourish us. That does not mean that everything we find in them is immediately applicable to our contemporary lives. Obviously, when the Torah speaks of the sacrifices offered by our ancestors in ancient days, that's not a prescription for our own behavior.

I want to end with a relatively recent Chassidic story. There was a new Rebbe (i.e. a new spiritual leader) who had replaced his father when his father passed away. His Chassidim

complained that he wasn't doing things the way his father did and was changing things. The new Rebbe responded that, in fact, he was doing exactly what his father did. Just as his father changed things from the way his grandfather did things, similarly he was doing things differently than his own father did.

To a certain degree it comes down to our commitment to our tradition and our willingness to engage with it and educate ourselves about it which is a lifelong process.

Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Mark